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AN Argus SPECIALIST PUBLICATION

Shouldn't we all be welcoming the sudden resurgence of the horror markets? After all, isn't that what *SKELETON CREW* is here to celebrate? Editor Dave Reeder is not too sure.

DEADITORIAL

"Horror authors, film makers and fans are better served by a hard market — discuss." Imagine the scene — the empty page before you, the examiner's clock ticking in the distance, the scratch of friends' pens on paper all around you. And now it's your turn — answer the question.

Well, to begin with, let's decide what it means. Does a hard, unforgiving market actually help the real creators out there? And, if so, in what way — financially? Critically? Artistically? Wouldn't they much rather have a market that forgives them their lapses, that greets their latest book or film with uncritical acclamation ? A market that's easier to get sub-standard work accepted in? A market that they can dominate?

Well, put like that, the question becomes a little harder. But it's worth asking — after all, we're right in the middle of a horror boom at present. Would we really wish to escape the wonders of 1990/1 in exchange for the more arid horror titibits of another year?

I mean, just look at what's happening — horror is suddenly mainstream, it's fashionable, it's all-pervasive, it's acceptable. On the one hand we have Disney Studios (Disney?) making the 1990's equivalent of JAWS — the dreadful (though, crucially, that just doesn't matter anymore) ARACHNOPHOBIA; on the other, we have BBC TV larding in the horror content into its adaptation of Kingsley Amis' THE GREEN MAN. Over there, we have the legendary Roger Corman returning to the fray (again, crucially, with a film whose quality is the least reason to want to discuss it — after all, after VON RICHTOFEN and GASSS!, any film has to represent a triumph, doesn't it?); on this side, we have BBC2 devoting a couple of hours to Corman and Carpenter, Atkins and Tuttle, Barker and Campbell creating a modern archetypical horror story.

As I say, suddenly there is horror all over the place. Have you seen the horror fiction shelves in WH Smith lately? Have you noticed the number of horror-oriented fiction and comic horror magazines on the shelves? Have you understood how, suddenly, the carefully nurtured horror icons of the true fans and cognescenti have become common property — would you have put money a year or so back on Ray Dennis Steckler or Herschell Gordon Lewis films being promoted heavily as part of a major video collection? Or widespread reprints of the classic MARS ATTACKS cards in all the comic shops? Or, well, just about anything?

But is it good? Personally, I have my doubts. Great though it is to have sudden access to a wide variety of interesting material and supportive though it is to have no longer to explain our obsession, I'm still concerned. You see, the problem is simple: most people who control the media (books, magazines, films, videos) just don't understand horror. To them, it's just one more commodity, one more trend to milk outrageously until the next trend comes along (In five years time — how many Turtle fans? Or BATMAN ones?), one more product. And so we see the phenomenon we've seen so often — the bookshelves groaning with black-jacketed-foil-embossed hack novels, the video shelves bent double under made-for-Phillipines-TV action/adventurers that can be relabelled horror and so on.

And amidst all this, the real creators get forgotten. Often too difficult to market properly (Just try creating a mass market newspaper ad for David Lynch's ERASERHEAD, in post-TWIN PEAKS hysteria), nearly always caring too much about their work to churn out the supermarket-fillers that cheap paperback publishers demand, always too caring to rip off the genre. Which is exactly what the media vultures will do.

"Would you have put money a year or so back on Ray Dennis Steckler or Herschell Gordon Lewis films being promoted heavily as part of a major video collection?"

And that's why I believe that the current widespread acceptance of horror as subject matter and stylistic overcoat is grievously damaging for the genre. Not tnat I want print runs of 250 or the complete disappearance from high street shops of anything subtle and well-crafted; just that I'd rather horror was hard to find but really worth it, than easy to find and profoundly disappointing and uninspiring.

So, yes, I do think the horror market suffers in a glut and thrives in a famine. Just don't expect publishers and film companies to agree with me!

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STEVE HARRIS

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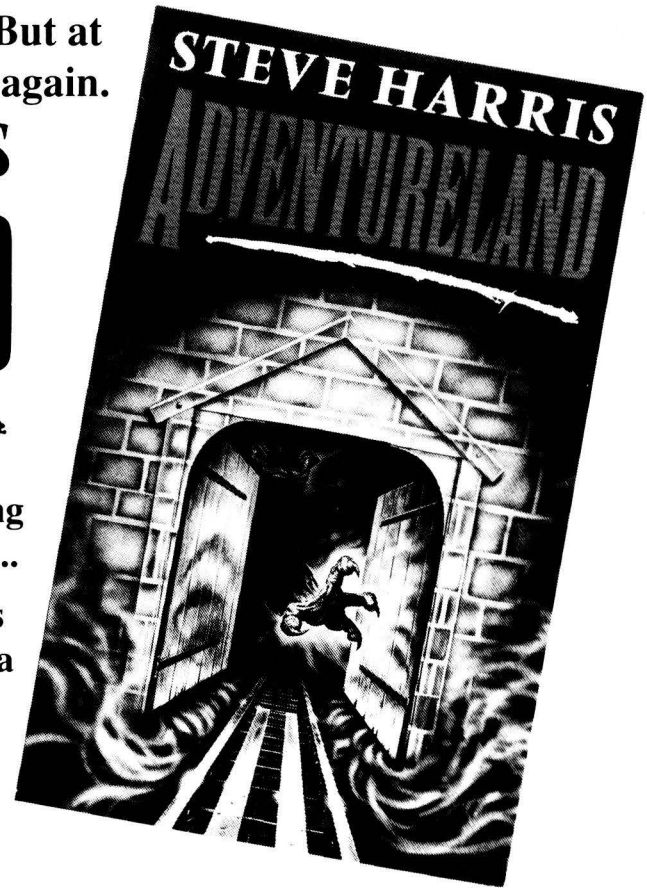

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BARCLAYCARD VISA

THE ROAD TO HELL

John Fraser's vision of the aftermath of a dreadful car crash leaves the reader with a question — is the hero haunted more by unbearable memories or unsustainable realities?

Dreams of Niomie, like fragments of a romantic movie, flickered silently through his sleeping mind. Cooconed in his hospital bed, Richard became awar of shadowy figures moving around him. At times he resented this intrusion into his private fantasies; he wanted to withdraw from the world of pain and uncertainty and recreate the love and security he had found, not long before the accident. With Niomie — he could endure the presence of pain. He could live, truly live.

"Have they found out what happened yet?"

Voices whispered around him as though unaware that he could hear them.

"No, they've no idea. There seems to have been nothing wrong with the car. The road was clear. One witness reported that it suddenly swerved over the crash barrier."

"When he comes round we'll talk to him."

"He may not remember. His mind may well suppress the memories. It may take time."

"We've got plenty of that, Doctor."

As the voices faded into the distance, Richard opened his eyes; his eyelids seemed heavy, as though he'd been asleep for a hundred years. At first the light dazzled him and he blinked, urgently twisting his head to avoid the glare from the windows. As he did so he felt a hand on his forehead and a soft voice whispering.

"Keep still now, it's all right."

Relaxing, he stared into the face of a nurse. She was young, about Niomie's age, but distincly less attractive. But, then, he had never found anyone as attractive as Niomie since he started seeing her, and he doubted whether he ever would again.

"What's happened to Niomie?" He spoke slowly, haltingly, drawing out the syllables of her name as though it was a magic spell that would unlock the gates to paradise. But the girl hesitated and when se opened her mouth to speak the words faltered.

"I'm afraid she's dead."

He stared at her, silently. No, not Niomie. She couldn't be. She didn't deserve it. She was so vivacious, so happy. He had been with her in the care when . . . Memories floated somewhere in the depths of consciousness, just beyong recall.

"So what happend, then?"

"You were coming out of the car park and drove straight into a tree. There was no other cars involved."

"How could I?"

"We don't know yet. We were hoping you could tell us."

Closing his eyes, Richard allowed his mind to drift back to that fateful night. But all the memories proceeded the crash by several hours. He had been attending a launch party for several new authors who Niomie had signed up and he was fortunate enough to have been among them. The party had been held at a new country hotel owned by one of her more commercially successful thriller writers.

Richard remembered sitting in the car, gazing across the motionless water where the elegant facade of the white hotel gleamed in the moonlight. Multicoloured bulbs were strung between the trees that bordered the waters' edge and couples walked arm in arm between moonlit statues of gods, serpents and giant birds. Stepping out of Niomie's beautifully reconditioned vintage Jaguar, he was almost paralysed by an acute sense of personal inadequacy. Dressed in a hired white suit, he squared his shoulders and followed her up the steps into the enormous sunlit lounge. A hot breath of air rippled through the chandeliers making a delicate tinkling sound. Surrounded by the rich and famous, he was about to put his arm round Niomie for reassurance when he suddenly realised she had disappeared. Then, tantalisingly, the memories faded.

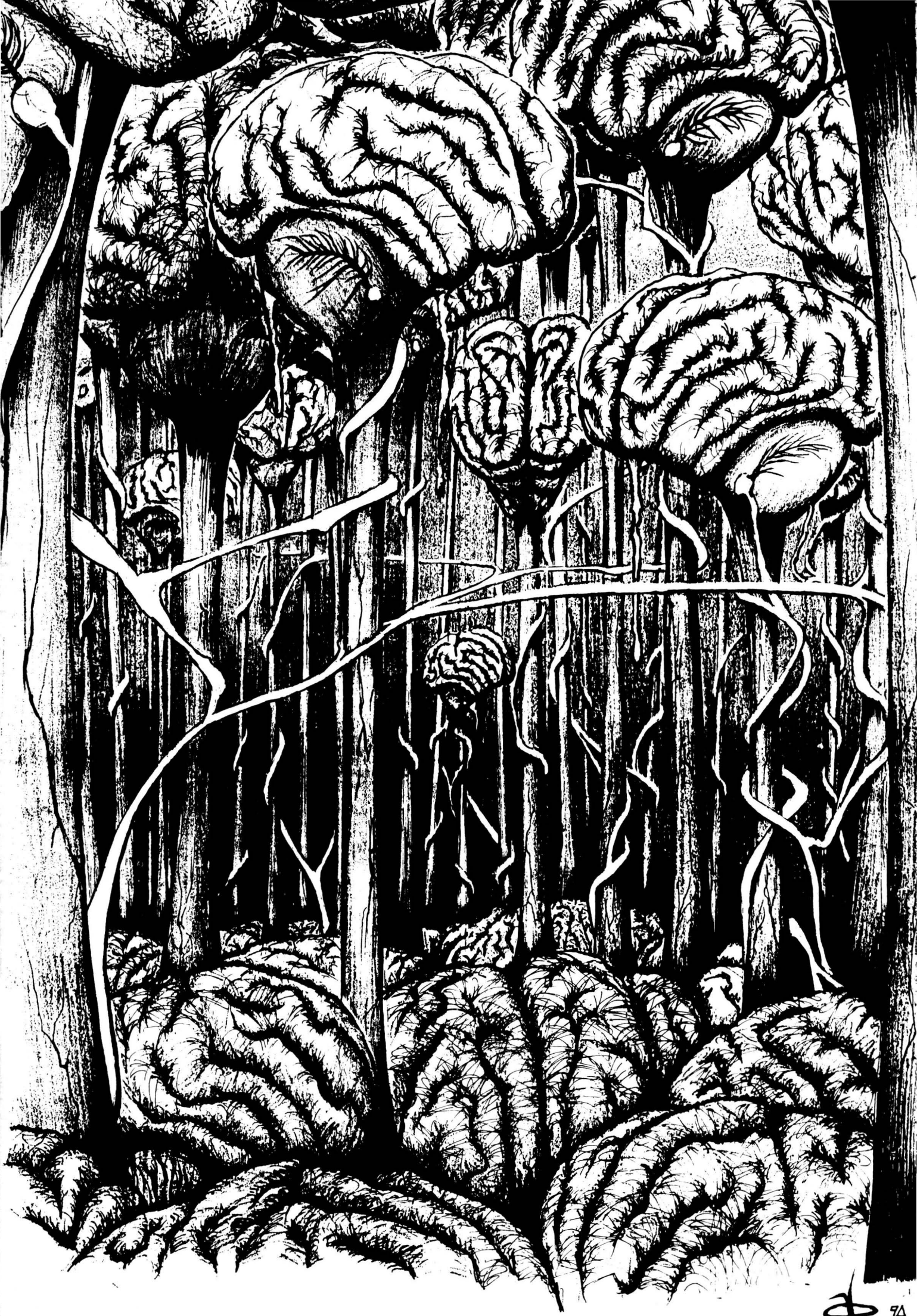
"I don't remember,"

"As the doctor says, it'll come back in time. We'll take care of you."

Watching her walk briskly down the aisles of beds, precise as clockwork, smiling and winking as she passed the next patient, Richard grimaced. Raising his head, he saw to his horror that both his legs were encased in plaster; tubes emerged from his arms. Only hours ago he had been celebrating life and creativity; now, immobilised by a freak car accident, he had been clutched from the precipice of death.

For several weeks he lay in a twilight world, somewhere between sleeping and

"During his long convalescence, Richard became aware of a curious phenomenon. Whenever he dreamed of the road and the missing moments before the crash, he would discover next morning that it had claimed another victim. Staff at the clinic were quick to dismiss this as coincidence. But for Richard, Niomie's vengeful spirit pervaded the landscape, luring unsuspecting drivers towards their doom. He kept such thoughts to himself, afraid that he might be confined to an institution."



"Relaxing, he stared into the face of a nurse. She was young, about Niomie's age, but distincly less attractive. But, then, he had never found anyone as attractive as Niomie since he started seeing her, and he doubted whether he ever would again."

waking, while his broken body healed gradually and the pain subsided. But nothing could ease the mental anguish which almost threatened to overwhelm him. For hours he would live motionless, gazing at the ceiling as though watching an invisible film of his own life.

As the days passed and his strength returned, Richard began to venture outside. Even in late summer the decaying Victorian buildings seemed to absord sunlight and a perpetual greyness hung in the air. Here even the patients were grey; shuffling along the winding pathways beneath the scrawny three they merged into the walls like ghosts from its primitive past. In a momentary flight of fancy he wondered whether he might not be able to stretch out his hand the grey people would pass straight through him.

Often he would sit on a bench and gaze for hours across the sloping fields, watching the distant traffic on the road below. Sometimes, he imagined that if he wished hard enough, Niomie's sleek red Jaguar would hurtle round the corner, and he would see her waving, her chestnut hair streaming behind her in the wind. Whenever a red car passed, his eyes focussed on the driver and his heart leapt momentarily. Once the car was out of sight, he would relax again, eyes moist with tears, memories of Niomie shutting out the world.

On bad days, he would remain indoors, playing a record that she had bought him for Christmas, watching it spinning round and round as though his life was an interminable groove of years winding forever back into the past.

And in the evenings, he would watch the distant lights of cars flickering like fireflies among the trees. Out there, across the dark deserted fields, he and Niomie often stayed until midnight, kissing and giggling like children while their hot breaths misted the windows and the fragile snowflakes fell silently in the headlights. . . .

Suzanne had noticed his frequent surveillance of the road with increasing concern and warned him that his obsession was merely leading himself further and further into himself. He remained aloof, ignoring everyone, staring into darkness as though searching for meaning beyond it.

"You're not doing yourself any good, you know. Sooner or later, you've got to make a decision. Don't let her ruin your life, Richard. She's gone now."

"I feel I've lost everything."

"You have. You're quite entitled to feel like this, you know. But one day you'll be able to look around and you'll wonder why you wasted so much time dwelling on the past. You can't see any future now, but you will. Believe me. You should talk to Dr Sanders."

They were sitting on a bench where the paths converged in a small square between the sombre buildings. Wrapped in a blanket, Richard stared into a circular pond that occupied the centre of the square, his face expressionless, as though transmitting pictures to a distant planet. The pond was now choked with weeds and papers floated like the pages of a rejected manuscript which some frustrated author had discarded at the sudden realisation of his own failure. As he watched, he felt Suzanne's hand on his and for an instant he yielded to her warmth and turned to face her. But despite her calm earnest eyes, the tantillising closeness of her body, he felt he might as well be talking to a hologram. Like a character in a Paul Simon song, he'd built walls, a forest deep and mighty which none could penetrate. Perhaps one day, the forest would wither and die; one day, the sun would burst through to banish the darkness.

"What do you do. I mean for a living?"

"I write," he said. "Mostly hackwork. Mysteries, that sort of thing."

When he saw the sudden interest in her eyes, he quickly said apologetically:

"Oh, you probably won't have heard of me. I write mostly under pseudonyms."

She probably had a soft spot for him now, wondering about this quiet unassuming character who lived in a fantasy world of his own creation, manically pounding out his dreams and nightmares for anyone who cared to understand.

"Why don't you write again?"

He almost resented such a suggestion now. It seemed a futile exercise. Those several months working with Niomie on his first 'serious' novel were the happiest and most productive of his life. Now he wanted a real relationship, not an imaginary one wrought out of some blind inner torment which was full of sound and fury, ultimately signifying nothing. But later, when she returned with a portable typewriter, he withdrew to his room and inserting a blank page, searched for the spark of creativity that smouldered beneath the surface of consciousness. After a while, the effort exhausted him and he pushed the machine aside to seek the comfort of sleep.

Drifting into sleep, Richard found himself entering a vast graveyard of crashed cars. Wandering among the rusting wrecks, which soared above him like the bizzare sculptures of some insane artist, he searched frantically for his beloved Niomie. He called out to her repeatedly, blundering aimlessly among the twisted metal towers. Peering through smashed windscreens, he saw only the distorted geometries of

mangled interiors.

All morning Richard waited for Dr Sanders to come and probe his tortured mind. At first he was content to lie quietly watching the gulls circling above the woods behind the clinic and listening to the incessant chatter of nurses outside his room. But he became increasingly restless, as he contemplated the potential horrors which the doctors psychological investigations might unleash.

When Dr Sanders finally arrived, he was most apologetic. He had, he said, been to attend another casualty; another accident on the same stretch of road. Sitting beside his bed, clipboard in hand, Dr Sanders sank back into the chair and closed his eyes while Richard recounted his dreams.

Richard stared blankly at the ceiling. He remembered how she always resisted his romantic overtures, his frustration at being unable to evoke a response. And then, like the multifaceted images of the chandeliers, memories flashed across his tormented mind. With the naivety of youth and inexperience, he had seen only her placid exterior, her inexhaustable passion for living; in the presence of such passion he was as powerless as a drowned rat. With hindsight, he realised that she would have had numerous opportunities to meet other far more successful and more interesting men than he. And the tall willowy figure she had her arm round on the balcony was more than just a friend.

In a fit of rage, he grabbed her shoulder. Wrenching herself away from him, she hurried across the hall and out of sight.

"I love you," he cried hopelessly.

But his cries echoed emptily around the hall. Of the few remaining guests, some glanced in his direction but he ignored them. He turned away and, head bowed, walked back through the rapidly emptiying lounge towards the car. She was sitting there, pretending to look away, across the lake. Dark clouds descended; lights reflected in the water, wavered uncertainly, fragmenting.

As Richard drove off, accelerating wildly away, he ignored her protests to slow down. With one hand he fought off her attempts to grab the wheel and suddenly the car slewed across the lawn, smashed through the railings and finally hit the tree, pitching her through the windscreen like a rag doll. And that was the last thing he remembered.

Dr Sanders explained patiently.

"It seems to me to mirror your real life. You were under the illusion that she really loved you and everything was wonderful. But really, she was leading you on and she didn't really love you. Don't ask me why. Woman do these things. She gave you a good time, probably hadn't the heart to tell you how she really felt. Then she rejected you, and because you couldn't face that truth, you unconsciously willed yourself to crash. You wanted her to suffer."

Weeks later, when Richard had almost fully regained his mobility, he explored the surrounding gardens as though the dense and tangled foilage charted some bizarre territory of his recurring dreams. Staring across the dried-up pond, he was reminded of the emptiness within his own soul. He wanted something, someone to fill it, to give life meaning. Even the physical pain no longer distracted him from his obsessions. Life seemed futile now; he could not live in world without love, and however much Suzanne cared for him, he would always be reminded of Niomie. He was anaesthetised to love; the sooner he departed this world the better. He was beginning to seriously contemplate the prospect when he heard Suzanne's voice behind him.

"Why don't you go and talk to Mr Harrison. He's been through it as well, you know."

He looked up. On the other side of the drained pool an elderly man on crutches was hobbling near the edge, peering into reeds. Suzanne went over to him, whispered something, and he came towards Richard.

"Hello."

"Hello." said Richard disinterestedly.

"What happened to you?"

"Oh, that new stretch of road. I crashed. My girlfriend was killed. I don't remember anything."

"I'm sorry."

"And you?"

"Same road. But I was luckier. I'd picked up this girl hitchhiking. Really attractive she was, wavy brown hair, hazel eyes . . . "

For a moment he stood there, as though trying to remember. He was dressed in an old coat that was several sizes to big for him. As he spoke, he craned his neck to the sky and squinted at the sun as though imitating a scarecrow. Richard listened, leaning forwards with sudden interest. He was about to blurt out "It's her" but somehow he restrained himself, allowing Harrison to continue his story.

"She was by the hotel, and when she got in I asked her where she was going but she

"Watching her walk briskly down the aisles of beds, precise as clockwork, smiling and winking as she passed the next patient, Richard grimaced. Raising his head, he saw to his horror that both his legs were encased in plaster; tubes emerged from his arms. Only hours ago he had been celebrating life and creativity; now, immobilised by a freak car accident, he had been clutched from the precipice of death."

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gave some evasive reply, as though she'd just come for the ride. Anyway, she told me she wanted to warn me about the road. It was dangerous, she said, but I didn't really see why it was different from any other road. I glanced round and was about to ask what she meant when I realised she had gone, vanished. In that split second I'd lost my concentration and the car veered off the road into a ditch."

"That's her," said Richard, excitedly. "She's alive."

During his long convalescence, Richard became aware of a curious phenomenon. Whenever he dreamed of the road and the missing moments before the crash, he would discover next morning that it had claimed another victim. Staff at the clinic were quick to dismiss this as coincidence. But for Richard, Niomie's vengeful spirit pervaded the landscape, luring unsuspecting drivers towards their doom. He kept such thoughts to himself, afraid that he might be confined to an institution. Whatever his instinct told him, he had no way of confirming his suspicions. Mr Harrison had been the only survivor of the road since his arrival several months ago. His injuries had been much less severe and he was discharged only days after their first meeting. His departure depressed Richard, who regarded Harrison as living proof of his own convictions.

At dusk, when Richard sat motionless before the typewriter, he was distracted by a sound outside. Roused from his adolescent fantasies, he listened. And then he heard it. Remote, like the wind, the whimpering of a girl.

Watching from the window, Richard saw the trees swaying in the wind. A sudden gust sent leaves soaring into the moonlit sky like startled birds. She's out there, he muttered aloud, face pressed against the glass, his bone-white hands clutching the window sill.

As the crying persisted, he gazed wildly about, surprised by the lack of concern from the other patients. Hadn't they heard it too? Surely everyone could.

"Can't you hear her?"

"Go to sleep, Richard," someone muttered.

Returning to the window, he saw her reflection in the glass like a mirror of his dreams. Beneath the halo of a street lamp, Niomie's ashen face glistened like a flawless sculpture. She stared at him with those wide hazel eyes that once seemed so innocent but which were now full of hatred and revenge.

With one hand feeling the wall for support, Richard shuffled along the empty corridor towards the entrance. Through an open doorway motionless figures sat watching a flickering tv screen. Somewhere in a staff room Freddy Mercury was singing 'I want to break free', as though willing him along. Beyond windows rain splattered semi-breves of water across the glass, like an overture to an uncertain night.

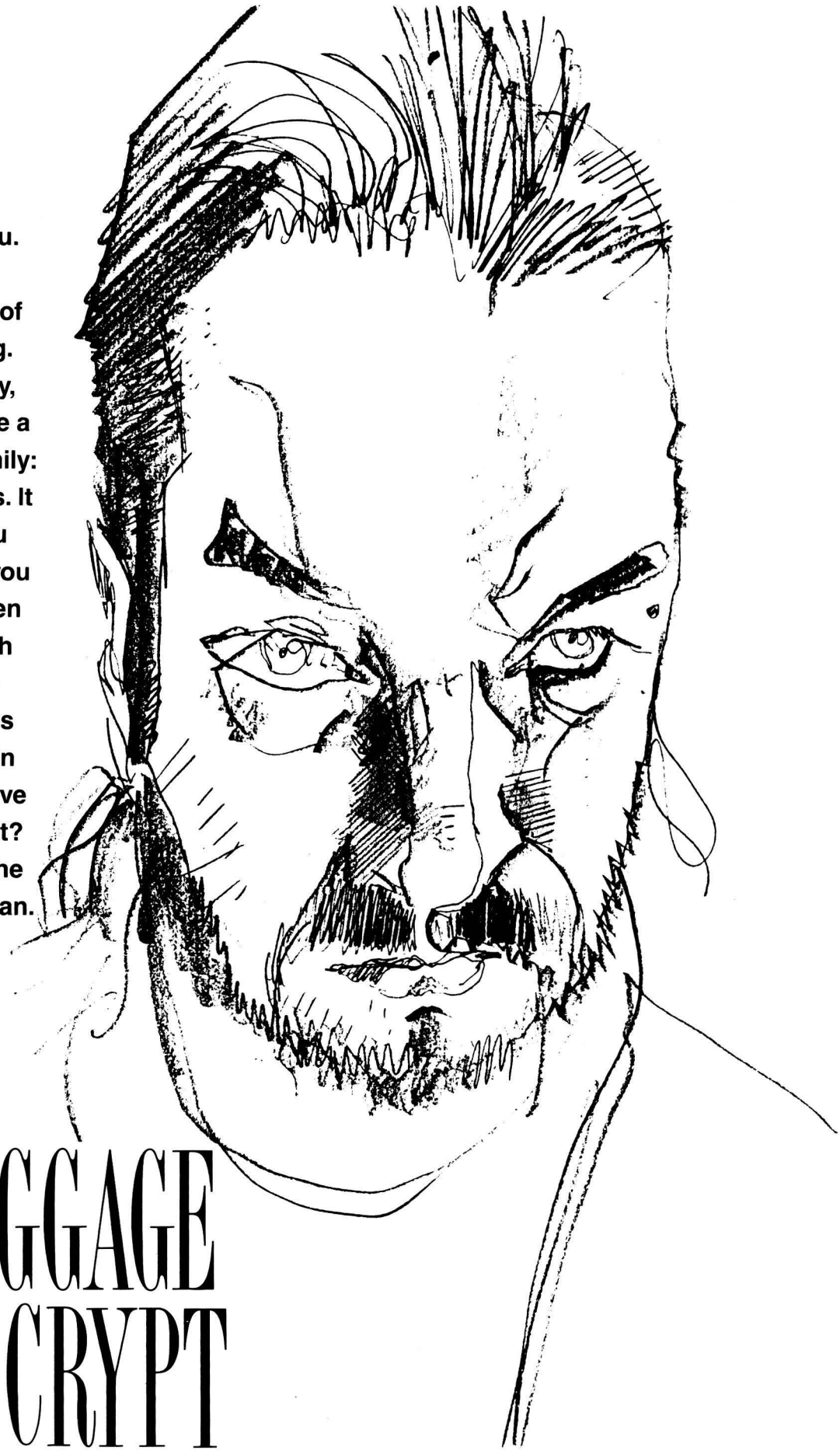
When he got outside he didn't look back. Wandering among the deserted gardens, her husky voice whispered across the turbulent years of adolescence like a tragic symphony. Now he clung to his memories, striving to regain all that was precious and meaningful.

He hobbled across the car park to the entrance, pausing briefly beneath the street lamp, listening to the continuous swish of cars on the wet glistening road. But although he could hear traffic, only the occasional vehicle past him. As he watched their tail lights wink out behind the trees, he began to wonder whether the sounds were merely within his head; perhaps the result of injuries sustained to his nerves. He lurched forwards, across the road, gesticulating wildly at invisible cars, until he reached the trees where he had last seen her. Slowly, he dragged himself up the embankment, and reaching out for the railings, swung himself over. Then he descended into the darkness of the woods.

Somewhere in the shadowy darkness he heard the screech of brakes, the impact of a car against a tree. And, in the deathly silence which followed, the faint whimpering of a girl.

He turned to face the road. Before him stretched an immense darkness, punctuated by the brilliant lights of cars, and Richard had the bizarre sensation of walking into his own dreamscape. As he stepped off the pavement, a red sports car hurtled silently towards him, hood lowered, its female driver waving and laughing hysterically. In a final act of defiance, he raised his arms to the approaching car and yelled for her to stop. But she kept on coming, faster and faster. As he swerved to avoid her, streetlamps wavered like enormous stalks blowing in the wind. Before the car hit him, he glimpsed through the dazzling headlights those cold staring eyes that now beckoned him with the promise of undisclosed terrors.

A while later they found him — a solitary figure dodging between the oncoming cars, his dressing gown flapping and his arms waving frantically like some demented prophet of doom.



You *can* take it with you. Well, so the Ancient Egyptians believed. 'It' of course was everything. Clothes, food, jewellery, furniture and if you were a member of the royal family: thrones, chariots, slaves. It was assumed that you needed in death, what you needed in life. What then did you choose? Which food, which favourite chariot etc? What items mean so much to you in this world, you'd just have to have them in the next? Nicholas Vince poses the questions to Dave McKean.

THE LUGGAGE IN THE CRYPT

"I just fell off the seat in the cinema and the scene leaves you with Woody Allen looking at this guy disappearing round the corner. Something about it just completely knocks me out, so that is number one."

NV: First question, as always: what do you think happens after life?

DM: I don't know. I'd kind of imagined that God would turn out to be this vague father figure. He must get used to watching us pootle around his planet but we have this thing called Free Choice, so he can't really intervene too much. I imagined that once we get up there all these frustrations come out and he'd be a sort of Harry Enfield character: "You don't want to be doing it like that. What're you doing it like that for? What? You planting a tree? What you doing it like that for? Plant them three feet apart. You don't want to do it like that."

Unfortunately, because I'm doing this CAGES book at the moment and it deals with a lot of these themes, I obviously had to go there and find out.

NV: When you say: ". . . go there," you don't mean crossing the Great Divide and coming back again, I presume.

DM: A bit; I managed to book a Virgin flight, and unfortunately it's terrifyingly close to the Jeremy Beadle show! They sit you down, with an audience of billions, and force you to watch the most embarrassing parts of your life, over and over again, with God saying: "Of course what he didn't know is that we arranged for lightning to hit his house and all his hair to fall out and his cat to get measles!" You just have to watch it over and over again and it's quite horrible. So, no, I don't really know.

NV: I like the idea of it being like the Jeremy Beadle Show, or rather I don't: it sounds like hell to me. Which music would you take?

DM: One's an easy one, an album by Heavy Weather, called WEATHER REPORT, which has my favourite song of all time on it called "Birdland". I used to play in loads of jazz bands, when I was in school and college, doing the circuit when Jazz Fusion was popular. So I played most of the tracks on that album — terribly.

NV: What instruments were you playing?

DM: Keyboards. We played a jazz festival and a few other bits and pieces. So, that would have to be one, another one would be KIND OF BLUE, by Miles Davis. Only because it started it all off. The Weather Report album was the first album where I *heard* — it must have been the equivalent of drinking Coke for most of my life and then one day suddenly having an amazing bottle of wine. You suddenly realise the quality and the imagination. I can't really think of a third one. It would have to be something really languid and relaxing, like an Arvo Part album or Jan Garbarek album.

NV: These are performers?

DM: Arvo Part is an Estonian composer and I'd take, probably TABULA RASA. Yes, make that the third one.

NV: What about films or videos?

DM: So, how many can I take? Two or three hundred?

NV: No, I allowed Kim Newman to take eleven, but he didn't take anything else. You can take three.

DM: This is the most difficult one, because I am just such a fan, horribly so. I think one of them would have to be STARDUST MEMORIES (1980, directed by Woody Allen). For some reason that sense of humour completely wipes me out. It's very much a thoughtful humour, it's not a quick gag or slapstick. But, also he manages to crack me up completely, just the tiniest things. There is one scene in STARDUST MEMORIES, where Woody Allen is [playing] this famous director trying to avoid the crowds and this great big, neolithic looking, guy wearing an ill fitting t-shirt, corners him. He thrusts this paper at him, "Can I have your autograph?" And Woody Allen is stumbled in to the corner and as he's signing it this guy says to him: "I was a caesarean." I just fell off the seat in the cinema and the scene leaves you with Woody Allen looking at this guy disappearing round the corner. Something about it just completely knocks me out, so that is number one.

Number two would be a film called THE LAST BATTLE by a French director, Luc Besson. He's since made SUBWAY which I thought was OK, and THE BIG BLUE, which I thought was lovely, though everyone else in the world hated it, I think. THE LAST BATTLE has a wonderful sense of humour and it's just the most beautifully, intricately worked out, gentle film. And yet it's a science-fiction film, set in this horrific world, but it has this lightness of touch all the way through it. And the music is great as well — to score this science-fiction film with this great lilting jazz is wonderful.

NV: I remember it as being very low budget as well.

DM: Tiny budget, it was made in black and white. And there is only one word spoken in the whole film.

NV: I like the gag with the blow-up doll that farts as it deflates.

DM: And there is a rain of fish that works beautifully.

NV: OK. Number three?

DM: Oh, God there are so many. I love BRAZIL. I love silent movies, because I love the fact there is no pretence of reality at all. These incredible images — I'd love to take something like SIEGFRIED or METROPOLIS. I would probably take WINGS OF DESIRE (1988, directed by Win Wenders) because it has the atmosphere of a silent film, with those black and white images. Again I love anything that can deal very thoughtfully with a very profound subject, with a lightness to it. The humour in WINGS OF DESIRE is superb. Peter Falk is in it and plays an actor who used to be an angel, Bruno Ganz as the angel who becomes human. It's a film that is partly in colour and mostly in black and white; a beautiful, beautiful film and the music is gorgeous. So, probably that one. But, that's only three and I'm allowed how many?

NV: Three

DM: Oh. OK.

NV: Oh, I hate putting people through this, he said, lying. Books?

DM: Can I swap them for films.

NV: If you take no books I'll allow you two films.

DM: Oh, what the hell, I'll take a couple of books. There are just so many films, I'd take the whole library. So I'll take a book of FRANZ KAFKA STORIES. The complete works and if it doesn't exist I'll get it bound. Just so long as THE TRIAL is amongst them.

I've just realised, I can take a couple of art books. I'll take, not necessarily because they . . . well, one because he is my favourite; an artist called Jim Dine. He's American, New York-based artist, still working and he does the most amazing drawings I've ever seen. I saw a show of all his drawings in San Francisco, having been a fan of his work for ages and it just doubled that admiration. What he does is to get models in to pose and these huge great pieces of water colour paper — which he has to get hand-made to his thickness because he just rips them — and he goes at it with charcoal and then he sends the models away and gets an industrial sand blaster and tears into this paper and it shreds all over the place. And he builds up these amazing dense deep textures and then brings the model in again to work it up and finally finish the piece off. They are just staggering pieces, and so I'd have a book of his.

NV: What sort of size are the originals then.

DM: Most of them are about five or six feet. And he's very famous for drawing hearts and bath towels and things like that. He did this great series of bath towels. But it's his drawings I like best. I'd love to take an Egon Schiele book, but I think instead I'll take a book of a photographer called Joel Peter-Witken. I think he's American, but I think he works in Mexico. He takes photographs of human oddities and his book GODS OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, not only has all these incredible photographs in it, it also has some wonderful writing and a great advert in the back, He says: "Five years ago I did a book and advertised for people to get in touch with me, most of the photographs in this book are due to the people I got then. So I'm doing the same." And he lists a great number of: "Wanted: people with three arms, no faces," on and on and on. In the midst of all these general ones, you'll get extremely specific ones "A blond haired girl with a distorted back, one leg and a tattoo on the top right hand shoulder." So, he's obviously heard of this person and is trying to make contact. There's one in the middle; "Anyone who lives their life as a superhero," which I thought was quite funny. And the last two was "Anyone who believes themself to be god," and then, "God." That's kind of appropriate for this so I'll take those three books.

NV: Alright then, which food would you take?

DM: Truffles.

NV: You mean real truffles?

DM: No, boring old Belgian chocolate truffles and some peach schnapps, but mostly the truffles.

NV: I've not heard of *peach* schnapps.

DM: It's actually the best drink in the world and it comes in white bottles, very anonymously. It's nectar of the gods.

NV: You've got your books on art, which paintings would you take? Or perhaps a statue, something three dimensional, you wouldn't be able to get in a book?

DM: I'd probably still take a painting because you can't reproduce a painting in a book, to see the paint on the canvas is a completely different sensation to seeing it in a book. I'd love to take a Jim Dine drawing or an Egon Schiele painting, but since I've got the books, I'd probably take a painting by Marshal Arisman. The reason I'd take it would be because it was him that got me into drawing in the first place. In so much as I went to a lecture by him in London and was com-

"I love silent movies, because I love the fact there is no pretence of reality at all. These incredible images — I'd love to take something like SIEGFRIED or METROPOLIS."

pletely knocked out.

NV: How long ago was that?

DM: This was my last year of Art College, which was 1986. I was floundering around doing little bits of nothing, had no idea of what I really wanted to do. I went to this lecture and walked out saying, 'I want to do that'. He's about fifty or so, he teaches at the School of Visual Art in New York and he's got this streak of silver hair and this manic laugh and he'd appear in silhouette in front of these huge great slides of his paintings — these *powerful* oil paintings. Apparently people only every ring him to say: "Marshal you're just going to love this: ten people killed in train disaster". Because everything is incredibly violent and angst ridden, but very very beautiful as well. He said that he went along and did this portrait of this guy with sixteen personalities, in an asylum. He had to do the piece for a magazine article about him [the patient]. He did the drawing, rather a huge painting: these things are about six or seven feet and it's a staggering painting. He got a letter from this guy, who'd seen the article and the painting. The letter said things like "I'm going to peel your face" and the audience is sitting there going: 'Jesus wept'. Then Arisman just burst into this manic laugh. It was the wildest evening, the strangest evening. That has stayed with me ever since. There are plenty of other artists who I like as much, if not more, but just for the fact that he really started me off I'd take one of his.

"Oh, what the hell, I'll take a couple of books. There are just so many films, I'd take the whole library. So I'll take a book of FRANZ KAFKA STORIES. The complete works and if it doesn't exist I'll get it bound. Just so long as THE TRIAL is amongst them."

NV: Any particular one?

DM: Well he's done a few of a Black Angel of Death, which sounds really morbid, to try and forget the fact that you've just died. But I'd take one of those. It's this dense black figure with these pieces of metal across the face and this red around the mouth. It sounds fairly horrific, but it's just the most amazing thing so I'd take that.

NV: Fair enough. An item of furniture.

DM: Well, can I have some more truffles? I really don't have a favourite rocking chair at home so . . . no, I have thought of something, you can get these packing cases from Belgium, I think it says something about truffles on the side, so can I have that?

NV: That's fair enough.

DM: So long as it's full.

NV: I suppose by the time you've eaten all the truffles, you could use the wrappers to make a fairly comfortable chair, so, yes, you can have that one. What plays or musicals would you like to see performed by celestial repertory company?

DM: Well, I went to see SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE (by Stephen Sondheim) recently and was completely knocked out by that so I would like to see them do that a few times, because that gets me every time. I can't think of any others. I'm just such a film addict every time I'm in London, (I wanted to see PRAVDA, there have been a few things recently) but I'm always stuck in the cinema.

NV: Costume you'd like to be buried in.

DM: Oh, I don't know . . . Father Christmas.

NV: That's fairly topical; it won't be by the time the interview comes out, but is now. Any objects of personal value?

DM: It's a big coffin, so a grand piano. And I'll smuggle some videos down the side.

NV: This is a Steinway you're after I presume.

DM: A full size, fourteen foot, concert grand.

NV: O.K. There is a fire in the crypt, you're going to be saved but you can only manage to take one thing with you.

DM: I'm just going to go up in flames, because I'm just going: "I'll have this, no I'll have this, no this." I'll be staggering down the holy staircase with the grand piano and everything loaded on top of that.

NV: Which brings us to the fateful question: which comics would you take?

DM: Well, it's probably not that difficult, because there really aren't any comics that have come out so far that have effected me the way my favourite films have, with the possible exception of FIRES by Lorenzo Matotti, so I think that would be the one. Because I'm working so close to comics, I'm always trying to criticise them as much as possible — personally that is, I don't like writing reviews about them. But personally I like to be very critical of them, because what I've always been trying to do is keep steps ahead and try and do better, if I can do better. So, rather than have the things around frustrating me, I'll take a couple of videos instead — just short ones. One would be a short video called STREET OF CROCODILES adapted from short stories by Bruno Ganz. And it's by the Brothers Quay. It is a surreal puppet animated film, which has been a huge influence on me. The other one would be WILD ABOUT HURRY, which is a Road Runner cartoon. It is one of the finest animation put on film.

NV: I tend to agree with you. Wile E Coyote and the products of the Acme Company are some of my favourite things. Right, we now put you up in front of a celestial court saying you either go up or down, tell us why it should be up?

DM: If my personal opinion of what actually happens when you die, which is nothing, is proved wrong and you do find yourself in front of a large gate with someone questioning you, they are just going to just have to accept that we all have good parts and bad parts. And if they look back over all that I've done and say no I'll just have to resort to mewling and begging.

NV: I'll probably be doing the same. What sort of monument would you like. Given all the tools, all the space or lack of space or whatever and it doesn't have to be a monument, just what would like people to remember you by?

DM: Unfortunately, it's just going to be a small little gravestone with "Just one more panel to go" written on it. But what I'd like is to be remembered as the man who got rid of all the computers in the world. So I'd like all the computers in the world just stacked up in this big blazing bonfire, because it's the Devil's instrument. In fact it's not, because when I was up there, on my day trip to the afterlife, I found they have teams of angels who were a bit redundant until forty years ago. Now they all have jobs looking down at people at computers, working away knowing that they've spent seven hours writing their novel, or a report, and they see them get to within three lines and think "Oh, I haven't saved anything yet," and the angel goes '**ting**' and the person thinks "I'll just get to the end and save it." Three words from the end, the angel snaps its fingers and the whole thing is wiped. And I know this happens now, so I just want a whole burning monument of molten computers.

"But what I'd like is to be remembered as the man who got rid of all the computers in the world. So I'd like all the computers in the world just stacked up in this big blazing bonfire, because it's the Devil's instrument."

IT'S UNBELIEVABLE!
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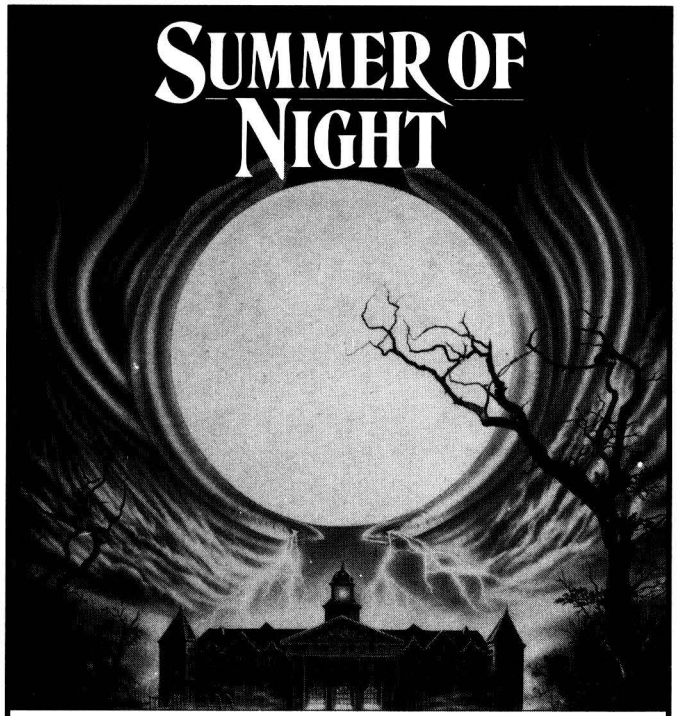

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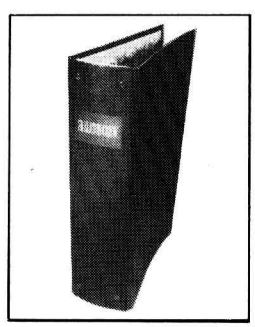

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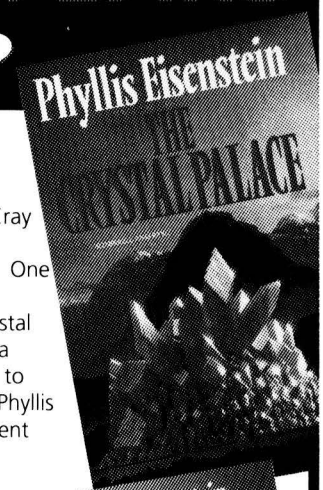

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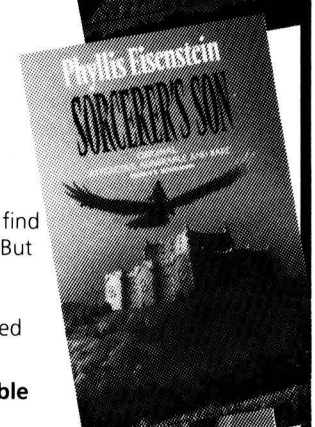

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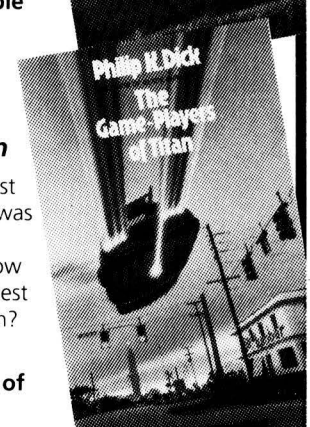

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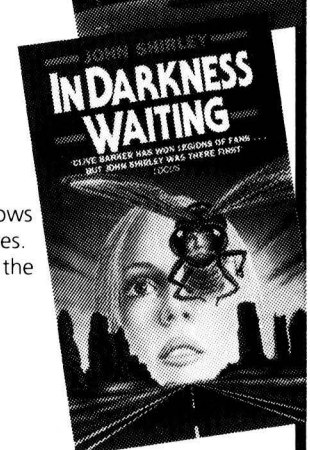

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CASTING THE NET

Seeing as this issue takes a serious look at Britain's hottest horror comic artist — Dave McKean of ARKHAM ASYLUM fame — it seems only fitting to cast a glance around at the state of the horror comic. And what a strange beast that has become.

Because horror is suddenly in and hot property again (see this issue's DEADITORIAL), the major comic companies are milking it for what it's worth. Though, to be honest, at present they're milking any sub-genre for what it's worth — how many more revamped obscurities can DC present for us (ANGEL AND THE APE? Come on, guys.)? How many more cloning operations can Marvel perform (What? Another mutant teenager spin-off? Yet another Spiderman title?)? And so we see the continuing survival of titles that, to be frank, should have died when the creative teams that either brought them into the world or gave them later critical acceptance left the books.

So long-term Jack Kirby fans weep when they see the abomination that THE DEMON has become and find it hard to come to terms with Kirby's relatively self-contained characters from his Fourth World series becoming mainstream and predicatable parts of the DC universe — Darkseid like an inter-dimensional Lex Luthor and so on.

And those of us who still reread endlessly the first 12 issues of SWAMP THING (er, that's SWAMP THING not THE SAGA OF SWAMP THING) for the horror classic that it was (and whatever did happen to Berni Wrightson?) shudden when we see what the title has become, post Alan Moore whose talent I always found more interesting when he wasn't reworking and reinventing and turning inside out the heroes of an earlier age. Personally, I'll take V FOR VENDETTA as a work of genius any day over MARVELMAN (oops, MIRACLEMAN), although the latter's artwork by Garry Leach and others was always stunning. And don't worry, I'm allowed such heretical comments because, way back when, I was part of the editorial team that helped bring them to the world — check out the credits in WARRIOR if you don't believe me.

Anyway, we're getting diverted. We're supposed to be looking at today's horror comics. So, what's exciting? To begin with, one of the most visually stunning comics I've seen for a long time — Jon Muth's M, based on the Fritz Lang classic movie. The story of a child molester at large in the streets of Dusseldorf (Peter Lorre in the film) is taken as the starting point of a descent into the maelstrom of childhood fears and uncontrollable desires. Book one of a mini series, it looks like a series of sepia photographs — are they tinted posed photographs, or finely executed pencil sketches or even old pictures found in a variety of places? It doesn't matter — they suck you into the story with their beauty. The best comic I've seen for a very long time — don't miss this one.

Useful as a sampler, if nothing else, is DARK HORSE PRESENTS 46 which allows you to see what all the fuss about PREDATOR is based on — an eight page short of Predator against man in the Florida Everglades. It's stylish, artistically interesting and predictable as anything — still the cover's great and there's an Eddie Campbell/Wes Kublick short about the death of a god that I was pleased to have spotted. Read this one in the comic shop before you part with the dosh.

However, spend money soon on STRAND, 'a radical new horror series' from UK-based Trident Comics, another anthology title with John Kaiine and Gary Caldwell's title strip a real treat — 'eternity smells of hot water bottles, warm and rubbery' and so on. In vicious black and white, it's a ritual murder mystery, a discussion about time and space, a diversion about insanity and much more. Back that up with the equally moving 'Where Angels Fear To Tread' by Daniel Vallely and a couple of other stories and you have goodies worth £1.25 of anybody's money. Space precludes us from delving too deep into the rest of the comic world this issue but if, like me, you haven't sifted through the piles for a few months then do so soon — there's some intriguing stuff out there, not least the EC reprints. Heh, heh, heh!

And on to films and a plea — if you produce a horror film fanzine, then send in copies at once. Coming up shortly will be an overview of what's currently available. For instance? For instance, PRIME GOTHIC, billed as the journal of the recently formed International Horror Film Collectors Club, which combines articles on esential subject matter like cannibal movies and the Mondo series of filmic trash with loads of video titles for sale or trade. We'll be having a closer look soon but, fairly obviously, if you have an interest in acquiring horror videos then you'll know the problems involved in finding a good source — this could be it.

And speaking of videos (neat link, huh?), here are a couple that I enjoyed this month and have managed to talk the distributors into sharing a number of copies with you — CHILD'S PLAY and GRAVE MISDEMEANOURS. Let's start with the latter, a comedy shocker that combines bad taste with gore — just our sort of film! Archie is a college student, bullied continually by a group of rich kids and forced to work (because he's poor) at his nasty uncle's funeral parlour after school. While his mates are having fun, he's draining dead bodies of blood, stuffing cavities and dressing cadavers. So far, so funny. The film then takes a serious turn when the brats are all killed in a car crash and, through that old mystic lightning, are raised from the dead to raise hell. If you thought he had trouble before, then you ain't met the undead.

As you can tell, it's hardly genre breaking material but the script (Keith Critchlow), direction (David Acomba) and spfx (Craig Reardon) all come today to deliver what's promised — an undemanding mixture of laughs and shocks. Acting is adequate with loads of standard college types, a bit of flesh here and there and — a treat this — John Astin as the uncle hamming it up for all he's worth.

Not quite as amusing is CHILD'S PLAY, released to video just as CHILD'S PLAY 2 hits the big screen. Directed by Tom Holland, known for PSYCHO II and FRIGHT NIGHT, it's an enthusiastic and workable mix of about six horror themes and films — six year old Andy wants a Good Guy doll called Chucky for his birthday but unfortunately his mother can only afford to buy one from a street seller and (wouldn't you know it?) it just happens to be possessed by the evil spirit of a mass murderer. Before you can believe it, Chucky is on the prowl, killing and causing general mayhem — of course, nobody believes a doll can kill. Acting by Catherine Hicks, Chris Sarandon and Brad Dourif is excellent, the spfx (by ELM STREET's Kevin Yager) are convincing and the direction compelling. I think

This issue we have ten copies of CHILD'S PLAY (from Warner Home Video) and ten copies of GRAVE MISDEMEANOURS (from Medusa Films) to give away to ten lucky winners. That's right, if your name is pulled from the hat of fate then you get two — count 'em, two — films to rerun endlessly on your VCR. Just answer the following three questions and send them in by March 15th to the editorial address (mark postcard or envelope 'Grave Play') and you could be in luck:

1. Name another horror/fantasy film that contains killer dolls and/or puppets.
2. Either name two horror films with 'grave' in the title or one with a significant scene set in a mortuary.
3. What was John Astin's greatest genre part?

Easy, huh? Finally, please remember that no employees of Argus Specialist Publications, Warner Home Video or Medusa Films can enter — but then we can get 'em free anyway.

you'll enjoy this one, especially towards the end once the voodoo theme has kicked in.

That's about all we've got room for this issue in our severely truncated review section but, as a final tip of the hat to the comics world, coming up but not yet seen are a number of 'must have' titles from Eclipse, starting with reprints of the classic MR MYSTIC strips by Bob Powell. Created by Will Eisner as part of the SPIRIT newspaper insert, these are wonderful strips from 1940 — check 'em out. Next, we have three Clive Barker titles — the on-going TAPPING THE VEIN is reprinted and two new books emerge. Firstly, SON OF CELLULOID — an adaptation of the BOOKS OF BLOOD shocker with the first comics world of ubiquitous artist Les Edwards; secondly, PANDEMONIUM, with the crucified Clive picture that John Bolton spoke about last issue — including a never before published Barker play, HISTORY OF THE DEVIL, and a variety of other background pieces on him including an interview with his old art teacher. One for us all, I think.

Skeleton Crew, March 1991

A modern day CALL of CTHULHU adventure for two to six investigators, by David Perry.

SWEET DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS

The investigators are in New York for a parapyschology conference where they are approached by a Dr. Jane Meyers, a psychologist specialising in the psychological effects of drug withdrawal. She will have heard of them through a mutual friend and wants their advice.

She works at a drug rehabilition centre and is worried about a growing trend among her patients. Over the last three months a increasing number of her patients have been suffering from terrible nightmares. These have all followed the same pattern: the dreams would start intermittently at first, gradually increasing in frequency and intensity until after a month they peak in one final nightmare. Of the ten patients who have so far reached this stage, five have gone completely insane and five have come out sane and cured of their addiction. A Psychology roll here will show that Dr.Meyers is concealing something, if pressed she will reveal that she felt that there was something wrong with those patients but that she didn't have any evidence to detain them for further tests.

Fifteen more patients are at various stages in the process and five have committed suicide. Dr.Meyers wants the investigators to cast what light they can on her patients' dreams.

Dr.Meyers regards the investigators as a bunch of misguided fools, being a total skeptic herself. She will totally refuse to believe any nonsense about 'Elder Gods' or 'unspeakable horrors'. Her only reason for contacting the investigators is the hope that by learning what myths her patients' nightmares are based on, she will better be able to cure them. When the investigators have seen the patients, she will grill them about what they think is behind the nightmares. Listen carefully, make notes and then kick them out.

It will take absolutely uncontestable evidence of the Cthulhu mythos to convince her of its reality. A corpse of a Mythos monster would do but not a photograph, as it could be faked.

Keeper's Information

What is happening is that Dr.Meyers patients have been supplied with a new drug called 'dreamfevere' by their pusher, believing they were in fact buying heroin. The drug provides the same initial effects as heroin but two days after taking the drugs a secondary effect takes hold. Affecting an unused portion of the brain the drug allows the spirit to leave the body and penetrate other spheres of reality. Unfortunately when this happens the spirits come into contact with Yog-Sothoth, which is what is causing the nightmares.

After two weeks the drug fades from the body and the nightmares cease, but by then the user is incurably insane. The five patients released by Dr.Meyers had been

driven so far into insanity by the dreams that they had become a facade of normality to convince Dr.Meyers to release them, although she subconciously released their insanity.

This drug 'dreamfevere' is being produced by a worshipper of Yog-Sothoth under the orders of his master. The addicts so far affected are only a small test group, when the cultist is convinced of the drug's success he will distribute it throughout America creating hundreds of cultists as well as hundreds of madmen and suicides.

At the Hospital

Dr.Meyers will answer any questions she can, that the investigators will ask her. She can tell the investigators that all those suffering from the nightmares were addicted to heroin and voluntarily admitted themselves when the nightmares started.

She will be able to play them a tape of an interview with one of her patients. The patient will scream insanely much of the time but there are snatches of coherent speech — 'piercing the veil'; 'huge, alien, impossible'; 'miles of silver bubbles'; etc. Players making a successful Cthulhu Mythos roll will realise the patient is refering to Yog-Sothoth.

If the investigators check the patients' records they will find that the patients are all ages and backgrounds. The only common link is their drug use.

If the investigators don't check, Dr.Meyers will point out that all those affected come from within a four mile square radius.

Dr.Meyers will allow the investigators to interview one of her patients presently suffering from the nightmares.

The Interview

Dr.Meyers will leave them in a bare room with the patient, a John Carpenter. Carpenter is twenty-three years old, thin and drawn with an air of terror about him. He is restrained by a straitjacket but will talk clearly and coherently and will explain that since the suicides started straitjackets have been placed on all suffering from the nightmares as standard, but that although he is terrified suicide is the last thing on his mind.

Carpenter has the following relevant information to reveal but will only provide it if asked.

The last thing he did before the nightmares started was to buy and use some heroin from a dealer.

The name and description of the dealer.

He has no connection with or knowledge of the Cthulhu mythos.

If asked to describe the things he sees in his dreams he will offer to draw them on a nearby pad if the investigators will free his hands.

If they do so he will pick up a pencil as if to draw, then plunge it into his eye as hard as possible. All investigators lose 1D6 san and 1 even if they make the roll. If this happens Dr.Meyer will be furious and will have the investigators immediately thrown out.

If the investigators refuse to release him he will suddenly scream and jump across the table at the nearest investigator (determine randomly or pick one you don't like) and try to rip the investigator's throat out with his teeth. He will bite causing 1d3 damage until dragged off or put out of action. Restrained by the straitjacket all he can do is bite. Shooting him will lead to the police being called, when playing the police remember that Carpenter was unarmed and restrained by a straitjacket and so claims of self-defence are not going to be regarded sympathetically.

On the streets

By now with any luck the investigators will have the name and rough operating area of the dealer who seems to be the cause of the nightmares.

If the investigators didn't think to get a description they will have to check out every suspicious character they see until they get the right one. These encounters could get violent if the investigators try getting rough; feel free to insert any encounters you like here.

If they have got a description they will find the dealer in about an hour of searching. Threatened, he will immediately surrender but will refuse to talk assuming the investigators are police; if threatened with violence or death, he will quickly realise his mistake and offer to provide any information if the investigators will let him go.

He knows nothing of the effects of the drug he is selling assuming it is simply heroin, although he will comment that it was sold him unusually cheaply. He will be able to provide the investigators with the address of his suppliers. He will not be able to provide the names of any others he provided the drug to. He knows nothing else of any importance.

"Fifteen more patients are at various stages in the process and five have committed suicide. Dr.Meyers wants the investigators to cast what light they can on her patients' dreams."

He carries a loaded .22 automatic pistol (never used), $5,000 in cash and 250 grammes of 'dreamfevere' which he will sell if it isn't taken.

Do You Feel Lucky?

The address given to the investigators turns out to be a very decayed house in a very nasty part of town.

The investigators have several options:

(1) If they just walk up and knock on the door, they will be searched and have their weapons removed and then be introduced to the two brothers, Michael and James Fairweather who have been distributing 'dreamfevere' throughout New York.

You will have to run this depending on what the investigators say but if they explain what is going on the Fairweathers will be horrified to discover that they have been killing off their customers (never good business sense). They will explain to the investigators that they were approached by a man offering them heroin at half the regular price. It was this drug, the test sample of 'dreamfevere', that they have been distributing.

The Fairweathers will promise to destroy their remaining samples of 'dreamfevere' and will lend the investigators their two heavies, Mike and Charlie, to help them deal with the supplier.

(Mike and Charlie will remain very obviously present throughout the interview and eject the investigators if they get out of line).

(2) The investigators inform the police of the Fairweathers' location. The police will thank the investigators for this information and allow them to be present at the arrest of the Fairweathers (though not to take part in the arrest) and will even, on a debate of law roll, allow the investigators to interview the Fairweathers alone.

The Fairweathers will be most reluctant to give the address of their supplier as they hope to trade that information to the police for a sentence reduction, so it will take more than an oratory roll to get them to divulge the information.

A promise to intervene with the police and to leave all the evidence at the site of the suppliers' operation when they have dealt with him, so the police will still find it when informed of it by the Fairweathers would do. Remember the arguments must be good to convince the Fairweathers or they won't give the information.

(3) The investigators could try breaking into the crack-house at night to look for clues, but the Fairweathers don't live there and remove everything when they leave at night so the investigators will find nothing.

(4) 1 and 2 are the sensible options but come on — drug dealers and urban crime — do you really think your players are going to pass up a chance to play out their 'Dirty Harry' fantasies.

If they opt for an attack there is only one door to the crack-house which is locked (the back doors and windows have iron sheets welded over them and will require explosives to get in and all visitors are scrutinised through a peep hole before being let in. If the investigators have disguised themselves as addicts they will be let in, if not they will be told to get lost and the peep-hole slammed shut. It will require a mechanical repair roll to open the door and an electrical repair at half chance to defuse the alarm; if the roll fails the alarm activates a siren, the police won't arrive for 3d10 minutes but the investigators don't know that.

Once inside Mike and Charlie will draw Ingram machine pistols and the Fairweathers nine millimetre automatic pistols and will open fire (see stats at the end of the adventure).

Unfortunately the Fairweathers will assume the investigators are from a rival gang and, expecting to be murdered anyway, will fight to the death.

If the Fairweathers are killed there is no evidence linking them to their supplier. Criminals are careful f things like that, so the trail ends here.

If one of them is captured alive it will take torture to get them to reveal the address of their supplier. If torture is used the investigators had better kill the person after they have got the information or they will have gained a very dangerous enemy deter-

mined to get revenge on them.

On the premises are large amounts of crack, heroin and a very small amount of 'dreamfevere', which can only be distinguished from heroin by chemical analysis. There is also $10,000 dollars in a box hidden under the floorboards.

The Final Conflict

If the investigators reach this far they will find the address given them is an abandoned warehouse by the docks. Here is the time to start dropping hints about half-glimpsed shapes in the murky water and strange gurgling noises. Get your players expecting Deep Ones so they will be wrong footed when they don't get any.

The door to the warehouse is locked and has a strength of 16 if they try to force it. Inside is pitchblack, a floor above is a lighted office with the outline of a man clearly visible against the window.

Suddenly off to their right comes a weird, bloodchilling laugh; the investigators have two rounds to react then one member of the party is lifted screaming into the air. Determine who randomly and include Mike and Charlie if they are there. Two rounds later another member is also lifted into the air, as their blood is drained, the outline of two Starvampires appear. All must roll on their San or lose 1d10 points; 1 point is lost even if the roll is made.

See the CofC rulebook for the rules for firing blind at a Starvampire's giggle and for Starvampire stats.

Any investigator looking at the lighted office will see the shadowy figure moving hurriedly around. Any shooting at him discover the glass of the window is bullet-proof.

If the investigators defeat the Starvampires, they will head for the office. They will find the door unlocked and the room empty apart from two items: one of the walls is an open Gate and on the floor is a small bomb with twenty seconds left on the timer. In the short time left, only two investigators can try a mechanical repair roll to defuse the bomb, the second investigator trying will not be able to get fully away in time and will take 1d6 blast damage.

If The Bomb's Defused

A Spot Hidden roll will reveal a piece of paper in the corner. This is covered symbols and is the formula for 'dreamfevere'. Anybody making a Chemistry roll at half percentage will learn how to make the drug.

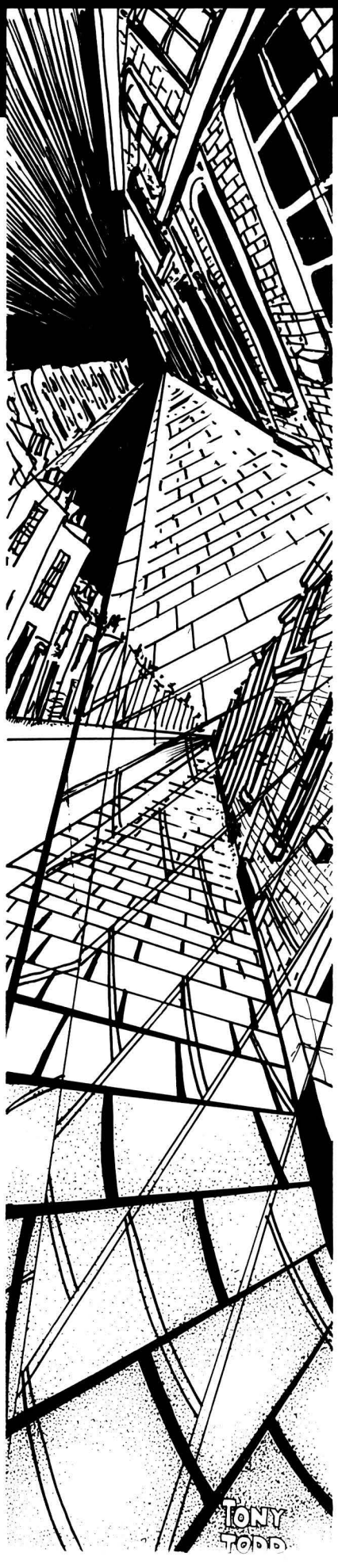
The investigators can follow the cultist through the Gate, if so they will find themselves in a massive decaying town of weird architecture. It is the middle of the day and the temperature is sweltering. There are plants growing from cracks in the streets, any investigator making a successful Botany roll will realise that the plants are African. The investigators will also notice that the street are far too wide for a normal human city and that the entrances to the buildings are all huge and totally circular.

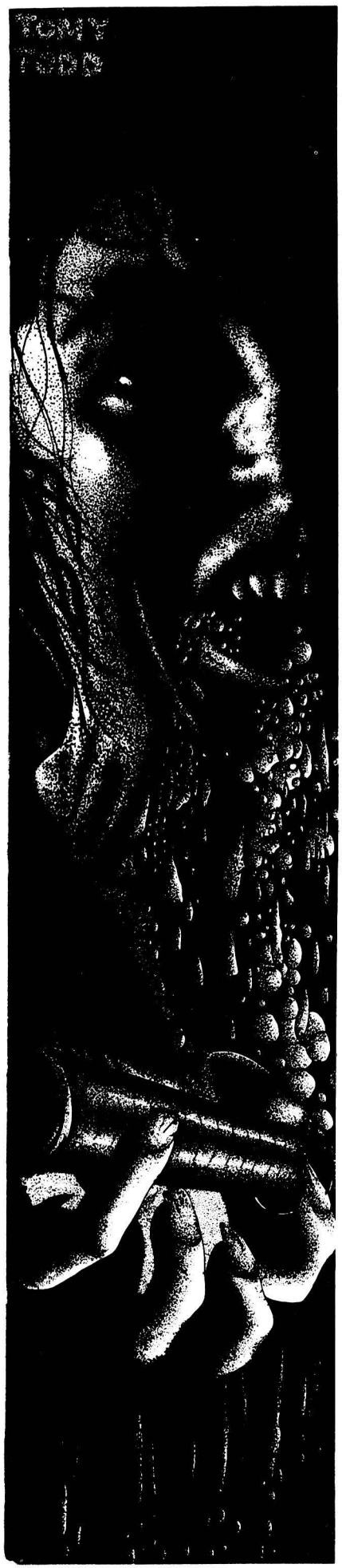
If the investigators realise these two facts have them all make a Cthulhu Mythos roll, tell any that succed that they realise they are in G'harne, home of the Cthonians.

If not let them explore but keep a note of how far they wander from the Gate, there is a 20% per round chance of a Cthonian appearing. This is doubled if the investigators start shooting. See 'Call of Cthulhu' rule-book for Cthonian stats and abilities. Roll each round even if one has already appeared.

Just by the Gate is a metal amulet on a chain, this will be seen on a successful Spot Hidden roll. The wearer of this amulet will never be attacked by a Starvampire, though his companions can be. The property of the amulet should not be revealed to the investigators.

If the investigators are lucky they will escape G'harne without ever seeing a Cthonian, though they will never find the cultist; if they encounter a Cthonian they can still escape via the Gate which is too small to admit a Cthonian. If they encounter a Cthonian and try to shoot it out, they will probably die.





If the Bomb's not Defused

The room and the Gate will be wiped out by the blast leaving the investigators with no ways to follow the cultist.

Searching the building will produce the chemical apparatus and raw materials which the cultist was using to produce 'dreamfevere' and 15 kilos of 'dreamfevere'. There is also a small living quarters where the Cultist slept and ate; there are no Mythos books as he took them through the Gate with him.

Rewards

Give the investigators 1d20 san for foiling a plot to create fanatical cultists and 1d5 if they killed the Starvampires. If they didn't alienate Dr.Meyers she could be helpful in curing sanity blasted investigators.

If they helped the police capture the Fairweathers then this will count in their favour should they ever need help or information from the New York police.

Similarly if they revealed the truth about 'dreamfevere' to the Fairweathers then they could be useful contacts for information or to obtain illegal items.

Dreamfevere

It is a white powder resembling heroin and must be injected into the bloodstream to take effect. Its effects are described earlier. It is hideously expensive and time consuming to produce.

Characters

Dr.Jane Meyers
She is 32 years old. She graduated with honours from her Psychology course and has been working with the mentally ill ever since. She is an extremely tough and determined women as well as being highly cynical.

str 8	*con12*	*size 19*	*Int16*	*Pow 12*
dex 10	*app11*	*edu 17*	*san 60*	*hit points 11*

Pyschology 90% Computer 60% Psychoanalyse 95% Debate 60%
Drive automobile 71% Spot Hidden 43%

Mike (thug)

str 15	*con 16*	*size 14*	*Int 7*	*Pow 9*
dex 12	*app 9*	*edu 6*	*san 45*	*hit points 15*

Flick knife 35% 1d4 damage
Ingram mac-10 45% 2 shots or burst per round 1d5 damage per shot

Charlie (thug)

str 12	*con 10*	*siz 9*	*Int 9*	*Pow 13*
dex 16	*app 11*	*edu 8*	*san 65*	*hit points 10*

Flick knife 42% 1d4 damage
Ingram mac-10 50% 2 shots or burst per round 1d6 damage per shot

Michael and James Fairweather
Brothers of a poor family, the Fairweathers turned to crime at an early age, gradually working their way up to their present position. They have a small but secure place in the criminal hierarchy. They dislike violence, feeling it brings down unwanted police attention but will not hesitate to use it if they deem it absolutely necessary.

If the investigators help them, they will be grateful and will be able to provide contacts for obtaining information or illegal weapons.

Though not conventionally well educated, a lifetime of crime has given them a lot of knowledge specific to their environment.

Michael

str 12	*con 14*	*siz 13*	*Int 14*	*Pow 9*
dex 9	*app 11*	*edu 10*	*san 45*	*hit points 13*

Accounting 55% Bargain 40% Chemistry 35% Drive Automobile 65%
Hide 49% Law 37% Listen 29% Psychology 50% Spot Hidden 25%
9mm automatic Attk 45% shots per round 2 1d10 damage

James

str 13	*con 15*	*siz 13*	*Int 12*	*Pow 9*
dex 10	*app 15*	*edu 12*	*san 57%*	*hit points 12*

Bargain 80% Chemistry 20% Drive Automobile 60% Hide 39% Law 35%
Listen 37% Pyschology 70% Fast Talk 58% Jump 42%
22 revolver Attk 31% 3 shots per round 1d6 damage

PLAYING POSSUM

Sometimes it's the memories that haunt us, sometimes the words. Or, as Gilliam Paddock tells us, sometimes it's both.

The house is full of silence tonight. I'm sitting by the desk, watching the sky turn gun-metal blue and fade down to twilight. There's a thin, sickle moon, trapped in the twiggy crowns of the bare trees. It's unlucky to look at the new moon through glass, but it's too cold to take the chair out onto the verandah and, judging from the dark cloud-banks hunched over the downs, it'll rain soon.

I stretch out the middle finger of my right hand and turn the wheelchair, until I can look at the desk. Ginny's left the terminal on, the words of the song she was copying frozen in amber letters on the screen. A touch of the keys under my hand, a brief flash of infra-red light and, with a tiny smile in appreciation of the power I hold over the beast, I make the machine speak the last line of text.

"Last night I saw the new moon with the old moon in her arms . . . "

I quiet the sing-song voice, not wanting to hear more. I know the rhyme — 'Sir Patrick Spens' — a ballad of betrayal, of disaster. And drowning. More omens — too many of those today.

Three of us live in this house; The Possum, Ginny and me. Let's take that list in reverse order: my name's Melloney and I used to be a professional dancer, until I put a hole in my spinal cord and tied myself to this wheelchair. I like to pretend that I would have been famous, if only the accident hadn't happened; if I were to be honest with myself, I'd have to admit to a lack of ambition and insufficient talent ever to have made it really big.

Ginny is the genius behind this house, this multi-level creation with its huge, sparsely-furnished rooms, wide doors and ramps, and the garden we had carved out of the hillside, a landscaped maze of gently-sloping asphalt paths and waist-high flower beds. They're featuring it in HOMES AND GARDENS next month — can you believe that? It was Ginny who had the vision to design the place and enough strength to keep my hopes alive, through every day of that dreadful year it took to build.

And the Possum? A Possum is a creature with a multitude of eyes, ears, hands and tails; I borrow its senses and when I pull the right tail, its invisible hands do the desired task for me. The miracles of possible technology. Six months ago we had a computer added to the Possum system and since then my life has been utterly transformed. Now I can switch on any electrical device without moving; turn on the lights, the heating, the television or stereo with just a few keystrokes on the pad embedded in the arm of my chair. There's even a device set level with my chin, an additional control I can work with my tongue, in case my hand freezes up with cramp, as it sometimes does. Ginny calls it my 'tongue-mouse' but I think that sounds too organic, too unpleasant — Ginny has an odd way with words, not to mention a rather disturbing turn of mind. I'm still not used to having the system; sometimes I sit here and just turn things on and off, out of simple delight of knowing that I can.

"I used to be a professional dancer, until I put a hole in my spinal cord and tied myself to this wheelchair. I like to pretend that I would have been famous, if only the accident hadn't happened; if I were to be honest with myself, I'd have to admit to a lack of ambition and insufficient talent ever to have made it really big."

Ginny is out tonight, gone to a dinner party. I could be with her; her friends were generous enough to include me in their invitation, although I have to be carried up the steps to their home and must use the folding wheelchair, since the powered one is too large to get through their doors.

"Please come with me, Mell," she'd said, twisting about like a contortionist to pull up the zip on her dress. Watching her I'd felt guilty, as I so often did, that I couldn't help her.

"No, not tonight." I'd shaken my head, one gesture still in my repertoire. "I'm not strong enough to cope with company — that bout of 'flu, or whatever it was, took a lot out of me."

Ginny hadn't argued with me; she'd left, at my insistence, an hour before the nurse was due to arrive. I get so little time on my own now, such infrequent and tiny pieces

of privacy that I'm greedy for them, snatching them whenever I can. I can't be left for long, of course; I need shifting every two hours, despite the sheepskin covers on the seat of my chair, or pressure sores set in.

Seven twenty-five and my nurse isn't due until eight. She's a middle-aged woman called Vy, a cheery, brimful-of-common-sense sort, with the arms of a wrestler, dimples in the plump folds of her wrists and soft, damp hands — I feel their softness when she slides them under my shoulders to lift me or when she massages the aches out of my neck. She comes in every night and sits by my bed, knitting candy pink and little-boy-blue baby clothes for her numerous grand-children; ministering to my every need and turning me, like a roasting chicken, every hour during the night. I sleep to the click-clacking of her needles, a monotonous, contented lullaby, and when I can't sleep, she tells me dirty stories and all of the village's latest gossip.

The bell at the front door chimes; all of the doors have bells of different pitches, so that I can tell them apart.

"Vy, is that you?" I ask, cutting in the door speaker.

"You're early. What's up — forgotten your key?"

I don't get any answer, so I switch in one of the eyes. Ginny is a cynical soul, with no belief in the intrinsic goodness of humanity; she had all of our doors fitted with close-circuit cameras. The screen shows nobody outside and I'm scarcely surprised. When the Possum's pet computer was first installed the whole system worked like a dream, but over the past three weeks it's thrown up a few glitches. Lights turn on and off at their own whim, doorbells ring without a finger in evidence and the stereo cuts in suddenly, cranked up to full volume. We've had the engineers out on four occasions and, in company with all lesser electrical devices, it never misbehaves when the professionals are here to watch.

"Stop being naughty, my furry friend." I advise it, shaking one finger in the direction of its terminal "Or we'll have to call the vet out to you again."

That's Ginny's bad habit, talking to the machine, and I'm a little ashamed to have picked it up. I let the camera pan across the front of the house; no-one in sight within the compass of our lights and beyond them, cold, windy darkness. I tell the Possum to turn the camera off and let my hand go limp in my lap.

I did have an ulterior motive in wanting to be alone tonight — it's an anniversary, of sorts. Ginny must have forgotten the date or she wouldn't have left me.

Five years.

Is it really five years to the day since my sister died?

Poor Finnula — out of the pair of us, you were always the bright, bouncy one; volatile, full of laughter, always out with your flighty friends, always at the heart of the fun. We were so different; I was the quiet, dark one and you, Finn, were so pale and fair. When I think about you all I can picture is your smile, that and the way you would flick your impossibly-blonde hair back from your face, such an negligent and impatient gesture, as if it irritated you to waste a second of your life on such a trivial thing. If I had to frame one memory of you it would be the time you stayed out dancing all night and I saw you coming home, hand in hand with the dawn, your hair falling down in wisps from where it had been pinned up on your head and your shoes trailing from your fingers, as you walked barefoot through the dew-covered grass.

It seems strange that I can't recall the day of your death with such clarity. I can piece the events together in retrospect, the bald words of what happened, but most of the pictures are gone, wiped out of my memory.

I know that we'd visited the hospice together, hoping that sharing the reality of Mother's illness would somehow make it easier to bear. Afterwards we'd driven up to the coast, to stand in the icy wind on the crest of the dull, muddy cliffs, looking out over the inimical greyness of the North Sea. Finn had suggested we walk to the top of the cliffs, but she was silent all the way up there.

"I couldn't talk to the doctors," she said, staring out over the bleak sea. "Did they tell you how long . . ?"

"Two weeks, maybe three."

She shook her head. "Who do they think they are, to measure out people's lives?"

When I looked into her face I saw that her inner light had gone out, she looked so sick and weary. I don't remember the instant that she fell, just the falling. She seemed to drop forever, without a sound; I didn't even hear the splash. I screamed for her, but the wind stole my cries. When I dared to look she was face-down in the swell, her bright hair a single star of colour in that greyness.

I open my eyes and the lights seem to flicker, coming back up to brilliance so quickly that I wonder if I didn't imagine the lapse. A sudden voltage fluctuation; perhaps there's a thunderstorm close to us. It hasn't upset the computer, since the display is unchanged. I shift the chair so that I can take the floppy disk out of the drive — Ginny will be furious if all her work is wiped. With only one good hand it takes me a good

"She comes in every night and sits by my bed, knitting candy pink and little-boy-blue baby clothes for her numerous grand-children; ministering to my every need and turning me, like a roasting chicken, every hour during the night. I sleep to the click-clacking of her needles, a monotonous, contented lullaby, and when I can't sleep, she tells me dirty stories and all of the village's latest gossip."

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"She broke down then and wept, my proud, beautiful Ginny and I cried with her, because I couldn't reach out to touch her. She's the brave one, Ginny is. Bravery is facing up to pain and suffering when you don't have to — I never had that choice."

minute to perform the simple task.

I pull the Possum's tail to draw curtains over all of the windows, to shut out the night. The wind has risen and wails its misery through the trees. so I turn on some music to drown out the sound. Ginny's left six CDs in the stack and I pick out some classical guitar, a quick, cheerful tune.

It was a mistake to think about Finn's death. That wound should have scabbed over by now, yet every time it comes to mind the pain is fresh, the blood is still dribbling out. Sometimes I believe that the distaff side of our family is cursed; first Finn, then Mother, and finally my own accident.

I should never have gone back to that awful place, the coast path where Finn had died, but at the time it had felt so right, and back I went, a year and a day after her death. There was a strong wind — I'd felt it tugging the steering of the car as I drove up the zig-zag road — but it was very still on the clifftop, as if I stood in a cocoon of silence. I'd brought some flowers with me, bright, sweet-scented freesias. I went up to the edge and looked over, down at the grey water heaving sulkily against the foot of the cliff and I threw the blooms over. They landed in a an abstract, multi-coloured pattern, a tangle of contrast against the grey, just as Finn's hair had been, a brilliant blot in all that dull uniformity. The recollection made me want to cry.

Then the earth gave way under my feet.

They told me later that I didn't fall all the way down the cliff, that the coastguards and their helicopter had taken me off the face, where my body had been caught on a ledge. I broke my back and a great number of bones that I'd never suspected were in the human body, but a blessed skull fracture kept me ignorant of all that, and of the pain, for many days.

I knew that they'd told Ginny the worst of the news as soon as she walked into my cubicle at the hospital; her cheeks were wet and she hadn't bothered to wipe the tears away. I'd rehearsed everything that I wanted to say to her; I'd helped her over the horror of Finn's death, then she'd been so supportive after the inevitable loss of my mother and I was grateful for Ginny for that, but she was a free agent and I'd understand if she didn't want to stay with me now, given all of my injuries and the havoc they would wreak in my life; and anyhow she was young, with all of her life in front of her . . .

She pulled a chair up to the bed and sat. Her smile was absent, broken. She put her left hand up to her forehead, combing it back through her lank hair.

"You mustn't worry, Mell," she said and I thought that it sounded like a sob. "Believe me, we can cope with this . . . I don't know how the hell we're going to do it, not just now, but we will cope. I promise you, we'll get you back as near to normal as we can — "

She broke down then and wept, my proud, beautiful Ginny and I cried with her, because I couldn't reach out to touch her. She's the brave one, Ginny is. Bravery is facing up to pain and suffering when you don't have to — I never had that choice.

The music dies in mid-note and the lights fail, as suddenly as if someone's snapped their fingers and willed it. For one, terrible moment I think that the power's gone down and I realise how naked and helpless I am without my technological crutches. So very vulnerable; back in that awful, infant-like dependence that I had to endure before Ginny brought me to this house, before the Possum became my hands by proxy. Is that why babies cry, because they resent the weakness that ties them to mother and cradle? I feel like crying, screaming into the piece of night that's fallen into the room, but just as the sound takes shape in my throat, the warm, safe brilliance flows back.

My hand is shaking as I run the Possum through its paces; dimming the lights down and up again, making the curtains flap on their rails as they swish to and fro, dancing through the channels on the TV and looking through all its eyes into the garden. It obeys every command willingly and instantly. Letting out a sigh of relief, I switch the music on again. Something has upset the system; instead of my classical guitar I get one of Ginny's discs, a set of traditional folk-songs. It's gentle, soothing, so I let it be.

The storm has arrived, hitting the west side of the house. I listen to the rain beating on the glass of the patio doors, like a lunatic trying to get in. Vy will be soaked to the skin when she gets here; she's already five minutes late and I don't blame her for not venturing out into the worst of the rain.

As I glance at the clock, I notice that there's text on the Possum's screen, scrolling slowly upwards and vanishing line by line. When I edge the chair close enough to read it without squinting, I see that it's the words of the song that's playing. Clever of Ginny to program that — typically sneaky of her not to tell me she'd done it — probably her idea of a surprise. I scan through the lines that have come up so far, with half an ear on the music. I'm bad at remembering lyrics; I don't have Ginny's ear and gift

for filling her head with them, so that she's word-perfect and can sing along with hundreds of songs, all her traditional favourites and plenty of contemporary numbers. This one seems to be about family jealousy, with a magical element. Wish-fulfilment, fairytale stuff, when a harp made of the breastbone and hair of a dead girl sings out on its own, accusing her murderer.

I tell the Possum to stop the song and re-start it, listening closely to the lines, until one kicks home . . .

"And as they stood on the windy shore, the dark girl threw her sister o'er . . . "

"What are you doing?" I touch the keys to freeze the display and kill the music, touch them a second time when the machine disobeys. The lines appear on the screen with a sickening inevitability, in mocking echo to the song.

"O sister, sister, let me live and all that's mine I'll surely give!

"Your own true love, that I'll have and more, but thou shalt never come ashore . . . "

Only then do I realise that there's no disk in the computer's drive. Ginny does all her programming on floppies, since the hard disk is filled by the Possum programs. Nothing should be on that screen.

But the song is going on and the words are still scrolling, although I'm blind and deaf to them.

What is a ghost? Not a shadow — there must be substance to cast a shadow and substance can be touched, measured and weighed. If ghosts exist at all, they must be things made out of energy, electric clouds, personalities clipped into pulses of binary code . . .

The music ceases and the curtains over the patio doors open themselves, sinister and slow. This time I know there's nothing wrong with the system, Finn may be dead, yet she's here, in this room, pulling the Possum's tail.

"Why?" I ask, aloud. "Why are you haunting me?"

But I know why, as Finn does. It's there on the screen, in the words of the song, spoken by the Possum's toneless voice.

"The bride her younger sister drowned."

I killed my sister.

The cliff didn't crumble under her, as I'd told the police it had, as it did under me a year and a day later. I pushed Finn over, into the sea.

I killed her; not because our mother loved her more and paid her more attention than she ever gave me, not because Ginny cared for her and she was so wilfully, blatantly ignorant of that, but because, at every turn of our childhood, everyone thought that she was the sweet one, the kindest, the nicest of the two of us — because when she did something wrong she would always stand by, smiling like a bowl of honey, and let me take the blame. So I killed her, and took all of the inheritance, and Ginny, and I would have done my damndest to live happily ever after, but for the accident.

"In terror sits the black-haired bride." the Possum says, as if it has a window into my mind.

The wheelchair control leaps suddenly, knocking my hand from it and the chair skews across the room. I know that it's going to hit the coffee table, yet I'm powerless to stop the collision. I shut my eyes, praying that the chair will stay upright. It falls and I squeak my fear out loud, a frightened mouse-noise — then I'm lying on my side, still strapped into the chair, hearing the topmost wheel whip-whip around for a short part of eternity before it comes to rest. I wonder if the fall has shattered any of my weakened bones — would it matter if it had? There's a pain at the back of my neck — I think I can ignore it, for now, until Vy arrives.

But Vy's already twenty minutes late and Ginny won't be back for hours . . .

The patio-doors behind me swish open, admitting a wind that cuts cold on my cheek and carries with it a lashing of rain. Something has broken in the arm of the chair and its sharp edge has carved a gash along my wrist; I can feel hot wetness running over my skin. I don't ever remember being so mortally afraid.

The Possum's mouth-control is sticking into my chin. I wriggle my head until I can get my mouth round the arm; it tastes of more blood. I have memorised the movements for the doors and I run through them several times, with no effect. The wind is in exactly the right direction to blow through the open door and the rain is heavy. My hair is already wet.

I can still see the Possum's screen from here, just by moving my eyes. There's a single line of text on it, too far away for me to read. I fiddle with the tongue-mouse, trying to persuade the beast into vocal mode.

"And surely now her tears will flow."

It isn't the machine's usual voice; it's higher, brighter, spilling over with the qualities of laughter.

Finnula's voice.

All of the lights go out.

"I shut my eyes, praying that the chair will stay upright. It falls and I squeak my fear out loud, a frightened mouse-noise — then I'm lying on my side, still strapped into the chair, hearing the topmost wheel whip-whip around for a short part of eternity before it comes to rest. I wonder if the fall has shattered any of my weakened bones — would it matter if it had?"

PORTFOLIO

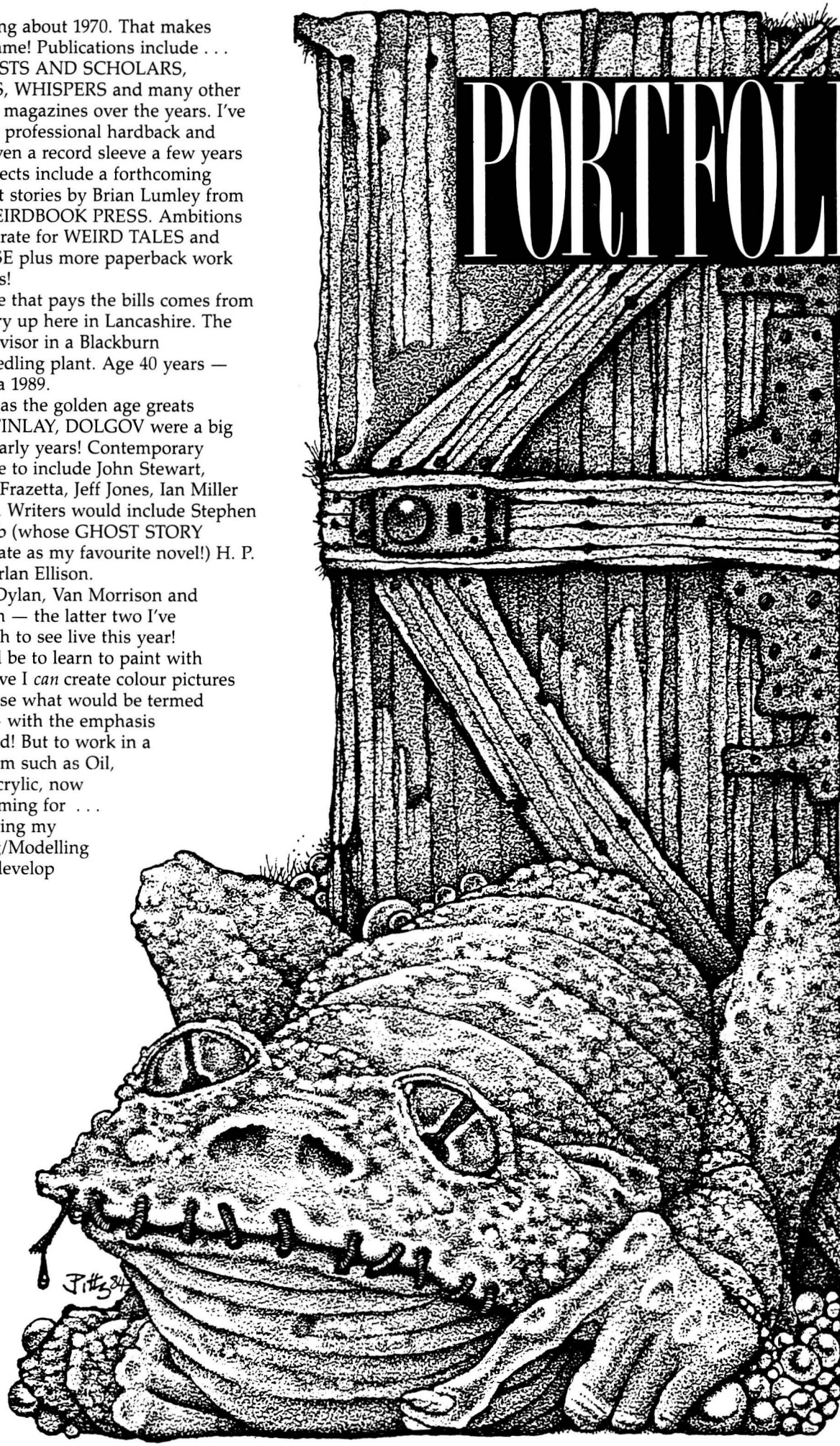
"Started illustrating about 1970. That makes 20 years in the game! Publications include . . . SHADOW, GHOSTS AND SCHOLARS, FANTASY TALES, WHISPERS and many other fan and semi-pro magazines over the years. I've also seen print in professional hardback and paperback. . . . Even a record sleeve a few years ago. Current projects include a forthcoming collection of short stories by Brian Lumley from Paul Ganley's WEIRDBOOK PRESS. Ambitions would be to illustrate for WEIRD TALES and ARKHAM HOUSE plus more paperback work wouldn't go amiss!

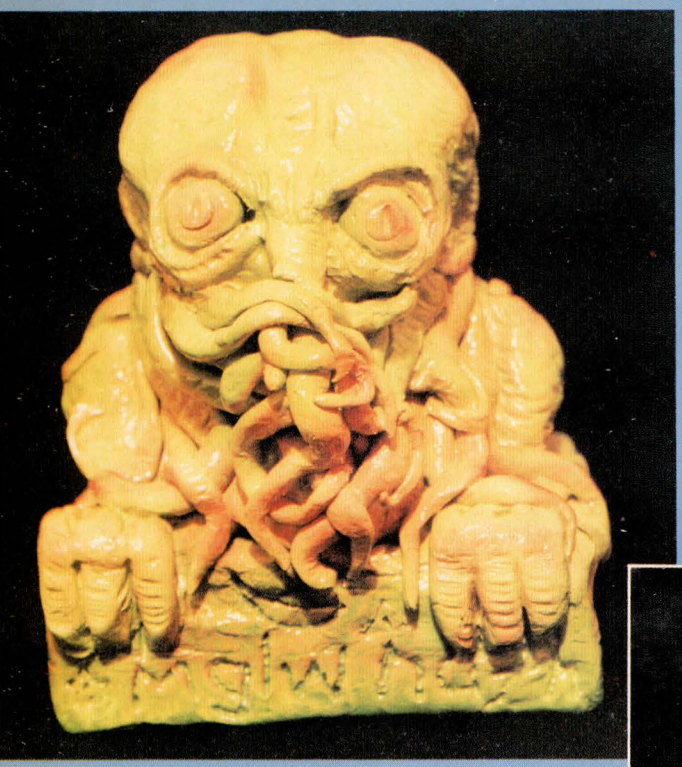
"The main income that pays the bills comes from the textile industry up here in Lancashire. The job — shift supervisor in a Blackburn stitchbonding/needling plant. Age 40 years — married to Sandra 1989.

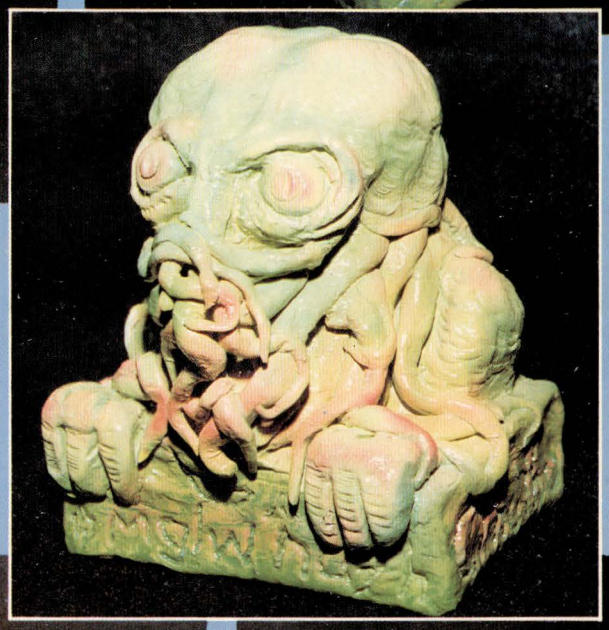
"Illustrators such as the golden age greats especially BOK, FINLAY, DOLGOV were a big influence in the early years! Contemporary artists would have to include John Stewart, Michael Whelan, Frazetta, Jeff Jones, Ian Miller and Steve Fabian. Writers would include Stephen King, Peter Straub (whose GHOST STORY would probably rate as my favourite novel!) H. P. Lovecraft and Harlan Ellison.

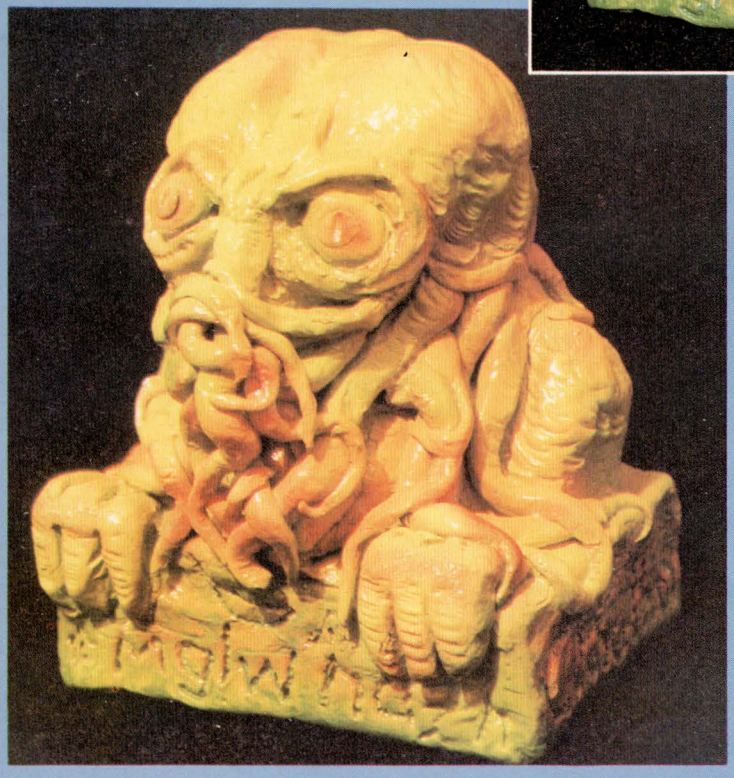
"I'm a great Bob Dylan, Van Morrison and Rolling Stones fan — the latter two I've been lucky enough to see live this year!

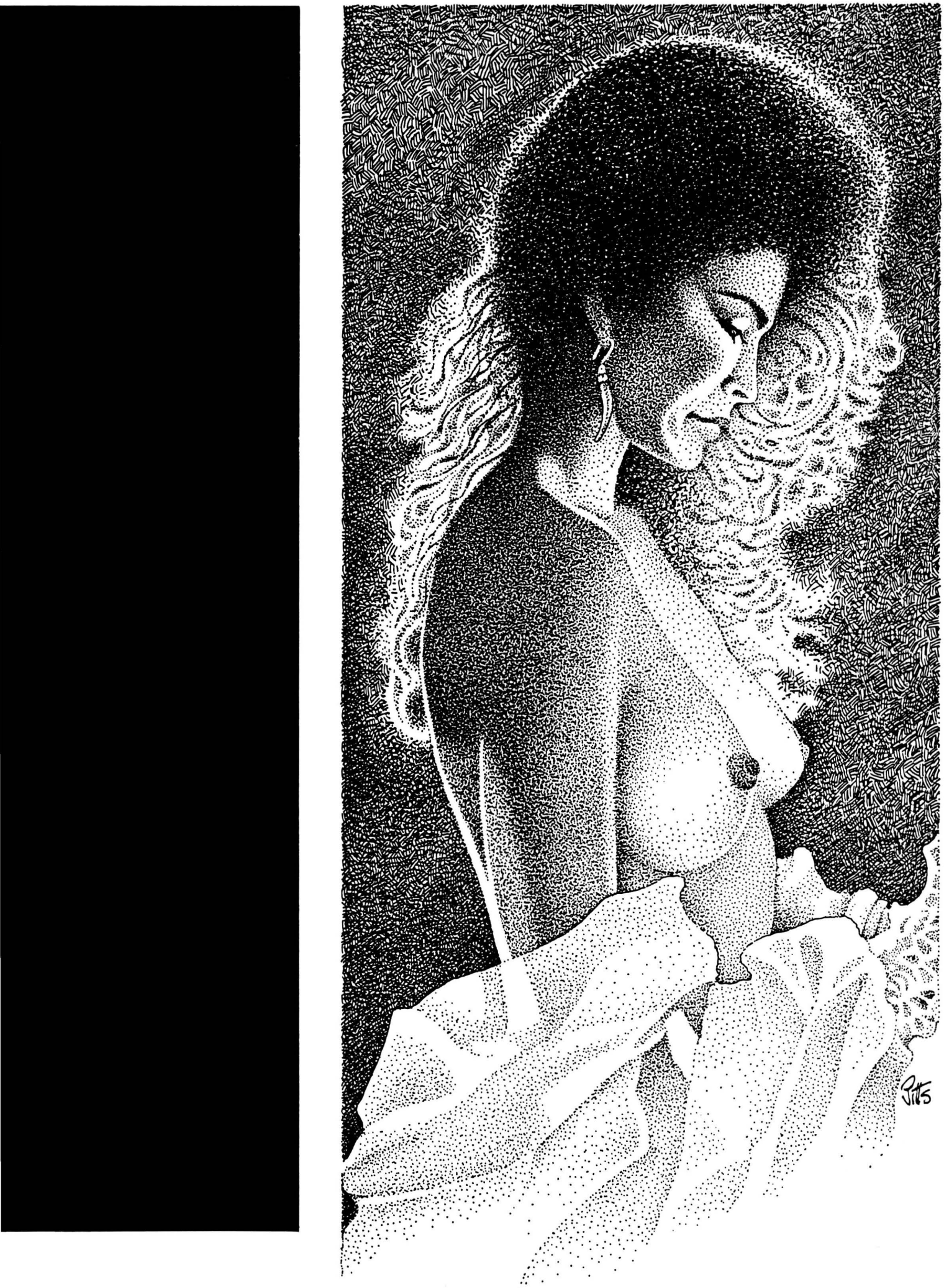
"Ambitions would be to learn to paint with some skill! I believe I *can* create colour pictures *now* but tend to use what would be termed mixed medium — with the emphasis on the word mixed! But to work in a recognised medium such as Oil, Watercolour or Acrylic, now *that's* what I'm aiming for . . . Also I've been trying my hand at Sculpting/Modelling which I'd like to develop in the future."











THE HAND OF A PRINCESS

We all need somebody to love, somebody to understand us, to take away the pain. Yet, as AD Leland describes, that's not always the most obvious person.

Arthur straightened up and swore to himself as his back twinged sharply. He'd been working all night. He was so weary that he felt sick, and the harsh daylight hurt his eyes as he glanced out through the doorway.

It didn't matter. All he needed was a bit of sleep. A few hours' rest and by midday he'd be fine again. In the meantime, it was important not to spoil it all by rushing things. He must leave nothing to chance and clear up properly.

There was the suitcase to consider and the handbag. A woman didn't go anywhere without her handbag, did she? She certainly wouldn't vanish for any length of time without her favourite clothes, keepsakes and jewellery. . . .

He ran his hands beneath the tap in the yard, wiped them on a piece of sacking and walked across to the house again. Inside, it was cool and airy and smelled of pine, polish and home-making.

There on the dresser, Susie's picture looked down at him.

A blonde angel. A sophisticated blonde angel — until you noticed that the smile was wide enough to be a grin and there were freckles on the bridge of her nose.

Such a beautiful little nose . . .

Arthur smiled wistfully.

She was slim and graceful, light on her feet and always sparkling. She made him proud. She made him hungry. She made him feel middle-aged and plain, overweight and ordinary.

Not like Doris . . .

He was dreaming again; tiredness setting in. He shook his head to clear it and forced himself into action. There was work to be done, belongings to be packed, things to be collected in such a way that it looked as if their owner had gone for good rather than a few days.

He made himself think it over carefully, draw up a mental list of everything she'd take then pack it all into her favourite brown leather suitcase. Last to go in was the matching handbag. Inside was her purse, her credit cards and the bottle of Chanel No.5 he'd given her on her last birthday.

Arthur smiled gently. He was happy in an odd sort of way. Quietly sad but quietly satisfied. He was doing what he did best; being slow and thorough, cautious and methodical. He was good at that and it was the sensation of doing what he was good at that was welcome and satisfying.

Patiently waiting his time. Planning and executing.

A play on words. Susie would have liked that. He could almost hear her soft, gurgling giggle echo round the bedroom if he put his mind to it.

Poor Susie . . .

So beautiful, bright and brimming over with vitality. Too beautiful, really. She lit a room and put everyone else in shadow.

Everyone except him. He wouldn't have minded so much if her light made him invisible. It didn't, though. It made him ugly, dumpy and conspicuous in its warm reflected glory.

"What the hell does she see in him?" He heard them asking and he could read it in their eyes when they didn't say it within earshot of him. He could have put up with it if the men of the village looked on with envy and loathing. He could have weathered that; felt smug and proud to be seen with such a lovely woman. The spark that lit his life and all that nonsense.

Only it wasn't like that, was it?

Instead of envying, they were laughing. Splitting their sides at how stupid he looked with Susie on his arm.

Poor Susie . . .

"The saddest part of all was that she was really, truly blameless in everything. She'd never given him a single moment of jealousy or doubt in the whole of their short, idyllic marriage. She really did love him — but he just couldn't stand it. The sidelong looks, the mocking smiles, the stifled, derisive laughter that greeted him."

The saddest part of all was that she was really, truly blameless in everything. She'd never given him a single moment of jealousy or doubt in the whole of their short, idyllic marriage. She really did love him — but he just couldn't stand it. The sidelong looks, the mocking smiles, the stifled, derisive laughter that greeted him.

Arthur wiped his brow and picked up the case decisively.

It was for the best, wasn't it?

And it wasn't exactly going to surprise anybody, was it? They would just nod wisely to themselves in the saloon bar and dispense tight-lipped, man-to-man sympathy. They would buy him drinks, keen to have him in the fold. One of the lads. Back with the boys again.

Then there was Doris . . .

He smiled regretfully. A man of his sort mustn't overreach himself. He'd learned that forcefully.

Stirring himself, he took the case downstairs, opened it in the yard, added a breeze-block for extra weight and dropped it in the duck pond. On his way back, he caught sight of himself in the scullery window. A squat, fat, ungainly shape in baggy, blood-stained overalls, tired and out of breath with the work he'd been doing.

For the first time in three years, he could look at his reflection without being ashamed and disgusted by what looked back at him.

Arthur grinned; almost light-hearted for an instant as he turned left, crossed the yard and walked into the barn again. He would talk to Doris. It always did him good to talk to her when he knew she'd understand. She was close to his heart in a way that Susie, for all her love and beauty, had never been.

Inside the barn, it was cool, dim and welcoming. He smelled straw, livestock and disinfectant; breathing deeply to take it in. The smell of heaven. The smell of life. The smell of the world as he wanted it to be.

But there was no time for day-dreaming when all had to be finished tidily.

The hand, for instance. It lay in the straw at his feet and he gazed at it for a moment or two; realising how tired he was, how tiredness could bring on stupidity. He bent, grunting as the muscles in his back complained, and picked up the hand carefully. It was severed at the wrist; small and dainty. The hand of a princess. The hand of a dancer, a decorator and a flower-arranger. The hand of light, life, humour and vitality.

He studied it dreamily, caught himself doing it and threw it over the wall decisively. There was a rustling in the straw on the far side and the sound of grunting. Arthur leaned over and scratched fondly at the tough, bristly hide while making a mental note to clean out the soiled bedding and consign it to the muckpile. Even in the dimness, he could see that the straw was laced with tangled hanks of blood-caked hair — scalp still attached in placed. It had been a long night, of course — and he'd got careless. He'd been working in a trance; cutting up sections and throwing them blindly over the wall.

Stupid. Thoughtless.

There were things that even a pig wouldn't eat, after all.

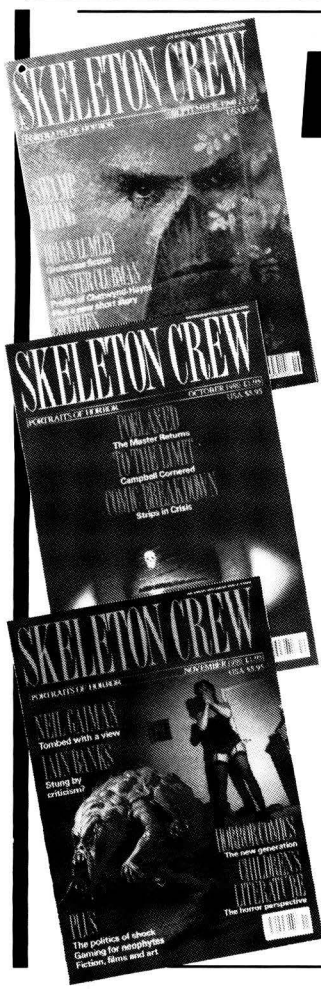
He scratched again at the pinkish-grey bristly back as the huge sow rooted about on the floor.

Arthur cocked his head and watched her devotedly.

"Well, it's just you and me again, Doris," He crooned softly. "No-one to make us feel ugly anymore."

"He bent, grunting as the muscles in his back complained, and picked up the hand carefully. It was severed at the wrist; small and dainty. The hand of a princess. The hand of a dancer, a decorator and a flower-arranger. The hand of light, life, humour and vitality."

"She was slim and graceful, light on her feet and always sparkling. She made him proud. She made him hungry. She made him feel middle-aged and plain, overweight and ordinary. Not like Doris . . ."



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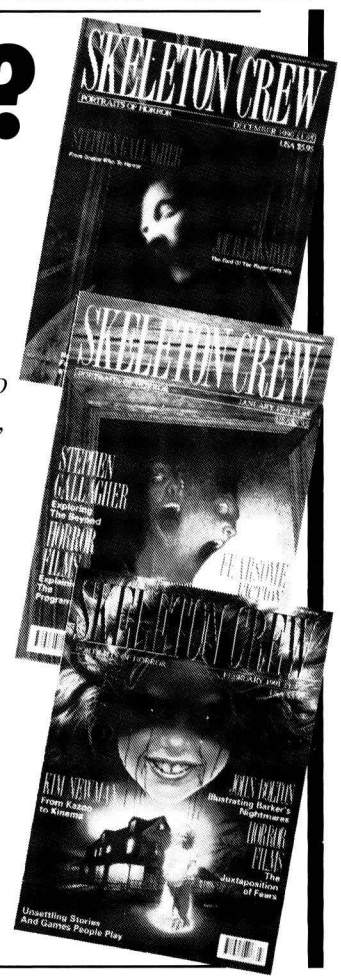


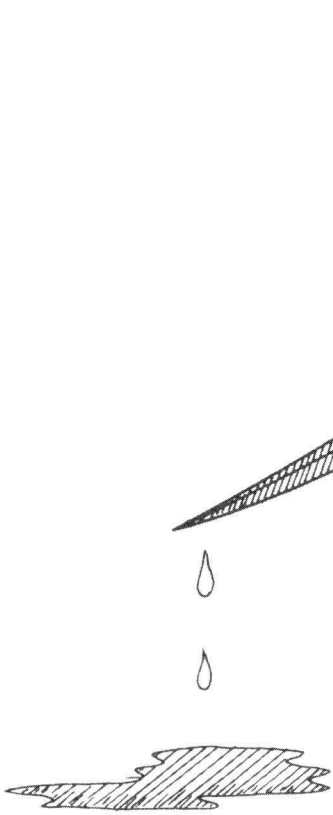
MOTHER LOVE

"That's the problem with killing people — sometimes they just don't seem to want to leave you alone afterwards. Let Gary Gibson explain."

When it was over, he stared at what he had done with empty eyes for several minutes before forcing himself to go to the bathroom and fill the tub with hot water. He took the knife he had used back through to the kitchen it had been taken from and methodically began to clean it with the compulsive, jerky movements of a Lady MacBeth, ruthlessly scrubbing at the stainless steel long after the last trace of blood had gone. He wiped down the sink and surrounding countertop and returned to the bathroom by way of the living-room, carefully avoiding looking at what was there. He locked the door behind him and stripped the soiled clothes from his back. His shirt came off with a wet, sucking sound. He climbed into the water and now began to scrub hard at his own skin, ruthlessly, methodically. Later he would put the clothes in a bag and get rid of them.

He tried not to think about Jenny on the other side of the door.

While he scraped his skin red and raw, he thought: I did it because she was going to leave me. That was the nightmare. That was what kept him awake at nights. The fear of being alone. Jenny's packed suitcase was still sitting in the bedroom upstairs. That would have to go too. Jenny was the only real relationship he had ever had. The other women, what few there had been, had never lasted for more than a few weeks before tiring of him. Because they found him boring, or bookish, or perhaps simply dull. At least, that was what he assumed it was; he had always been afraid to ask. Jenny was different though; Jenny had cared. She was the only woman who had ever chosen to actually live with him.



Later, he rolled Jenny up in some heavy plastic sheeting he found in the back of the garage. She was light, and it turned out to be not too hard to carry her into the kitchen, carefully avoiding the windows. He went back through and moved the furniture to one side, rolling the carpet and underlay back to expose the bare floorboards. Working feverishly now, he used a claw hammer to yank out the nails from the floorboards at one end of the living room, pulling them back until a space wide enough to accommodate Jenny was exposed. He brought her back through and squeezed her through the gap. She landed with a muffled thump in the darkness below. He nailed the floorboards back into place, rolled the carpet back down and pushed the furniture back. He turned on a radio and fetched a bottle of whisky they'd kept for special occasions and birthdays and began to gulp in down in short, bitter sips straight from the bottle. The raw whisky seared his throat and blurred his vision but he kept at it until the pain faded away to a distant, far-off place and oblivion finally came.

A week later things had become as normal as they ever would be. He had gone to his work as a minor clerical assistant the day after with a roaring hangover, obvious enough to get a warning from the factory supervisor. But he had just kept his head down and nothing more had been said. At home he avoided looking at the far corner of the living room. A few blocks away a building site had produced a bonfire, burning old rotted planks from a building being renovated; he had thrown the plastic bag full of his blood-splattered clothes into the heart of the blaze. He spent the week watching television in the living-room. It had never been a habit of theirs to go out. They had no friends, only each other. When he slept at night, he stayed on his side of the bed and took great pains not to lie on that part of the mattress where Jenny usually slept. He would still find strands of Jenny's golden hair caught in hairbrushes, on the shoulder of a jacket. Gradually he lost his fear of discovery. He felt no remorse as such, only a distant memory of the numb panic that had overtaken him when Jenny had started to say goodbye. Somewhere, some part of him knew what he had done and screamed in torment. But as far as the rest of him was concerned, he and Jenny were together forever. She was never going to leave him now. She would always be there, waiting for him when he came home.

After another couple of weeks he began to notice things. He would wake in the morning and stagger downstairs and find himself drinking a cup of instant coffee he couldn't remember making. Also; the house became uncomfortably warm. Despite it being early in the year, there was still occasional snow, he found himself having to turn down the central heating more and more, often turning it off altogether as time passed. He began to notice that the walls seemed to radiate with their own internal

heat. Sometimes, when the part of him that knew what he had done achieved some kind of temporary dominance, he would stand at the door to the kitchen and punch the wall until his fingers were sore, raw and bleeding. He started to take more time off work; he couldn't think of a single excuse to give whenever he turned up at work with his hand swathed in heavy cotton bandages. One day, almost a month after the argument with Jenny, he was punching the wall methodically and ruthlessly when he noticed that the plaster was beginning to yield under the pressure. It was like punching a stiff cushion. The small indentation would gradually disappear after a minute, and the wall would recover it's smooth flatness. Bewildered and a little frightened he went into the kitchen and found a cup of instant coffee sitting on the kitchen table, freshly made. He stared at it, then took a sip from it. Just right. The way Jenny made it.

The next day he didn't go to work.

He sat in the living-room, staring at the TV with the sound down. Jenny had an inexplicable desire to watch endless Australian soaps, and out of a sense of courtesy he put them on. Out of the corner of his eye something struck him as odd. He looked around; something about the room was different, although he couldn't quite figure out what. Gradually he realised where the difference was. It was in the corner, where he had peeled back the floorboards. He got out of his chair by the window and looked closer. He'd been avoiding walking on this part of the room as well as avoiding looking at it. Somehow it seemed wrong. He had to move in close to the wallpaper before he realised what it was. There was a fine tracery of connected lines running across the walls, like veins. He pressed the flat of his hand against the wall. It was warm, yielding. Trembling, he carefully lifted up the edge of the carpet and looked at the floorboards underneath. A fine tracery of lines like veins spread across the knots and whorls of the wood, disappearing under him. Yielding, soft and warm. Shaking, he went upstairs to the bedroom and climbed into the bed and lay there for the rest of the day, staring at the door.

He didn't go to work the next day either. Or the day after that.

He found himself avoiding the living-room. The heating stayed off all the time now, even though it was unseasonally cold for the time of year. The tracery of veins he had first noticed in the corner where Jenny now lay began to spread outwards, throughout the house. A few days later he realised it had spread to the kitchen and even to the furniture. The table that sat in the exact centre of the kitchen became fused to the floor as the fine tracery spread up its legs and across the table top. The lines even began to crawl across the windows. He found himself increasingly reluctant to step outside into the cold winter air, but curiosity forced him to go out to the street and look back at the house. The lines that ran across the windows were almost invisible from outside; you could only see them if you looked very, very closely indeed. They were invisible to the casual passer-by. He felt relieved to be back inside, as if he were attached to the house and Jenny by an invisible umbilical cord.

One day he went downstairs and the kitchen table had metamorphosed. The table top was no longer a flat, smooth sheet of formica; it had buckled upwards, was now heavily veined, had become rounded, smooth and pink. It culminated in a thick pink teat a few inches across. He stroked its surface and noted the fine golden down that covered it, that spread down the table legs. He touched the teat cautiously, pressing it down very slightly. A small drop of milky fluid appeared at the top of the teat. Carefully, he touched the fluid with his fingertip. Put his finger to his mouth and sucked on it. Bittersweet, milky. He realised there was no food; it had been that long since he had left the house, but he couldn't bring himself to go a few hundred yards down the road to a local shop. Stomach rumbling, he left the kitchen. Then he noticed the living room.

There was very little light; it was almost pitch dark in there, from what he could see from the short corridor that led from the kitchen to the living-room and also contained the staircase. Warm, musky air filtered from the doorway, which was beginning to lose its shape, its edges becoming rounded, pink and smooth. He stopped at the entrance, afraid to go any further. The floor was soft under his bare feet; they sank a couple of inches into it. The warm air filtered out of the living-room, and then back in again. It was breathing.

The rest of the day he restricted his movements to the kitchen and the bedroom upstairs. There was a second small toilet on the upper landing which he now used, since access to the downstairs bathroom was through the living-room. Besides, he had given up bathing himself since the day of the argument. He no longer felt fear at what was happening to him; in a way it was comforting. All his worries had gone, his normal abrasiveness that frightened people away from him evaporated. He no longer felt as insecure as he had for most of his adult life. He knew it was because Jenny was never going to leave him now. The changes became more rapid. The corners of the ceilings and floors began to lose their sharp right angles, becoming rounded, soft. The

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corridor at the front of the house became a smooth, pink tunnel of warm flesh. If he put his ear next to it, he could hear liquid rushing through hidden cavities and a distant, steady thrumming. The bedroom was so far the least affected area of the house. He stayed there for the rest of the day, listening to his stomach growl and staring at the door, which had now began to sprout its own thick tracery of veins.

In the evening, hunger drove him back to the kitchen. The kitchen door had almost vanished, losing itself as the house reshaped itself around him. The table had now ceased to look even remotely like a table, and was now a single smooth hummock rising from the kitchen floor. Nervously, he approached, gently lay a hand on the soft, rubbery teat. It came up to his chest. Air filtered past his head, first one way, then the other. Hunger and something else he couldn't name made him lean down and put the teat in his mouth. He rested his arms on the flesh that surrounded it and the pressure was enough to make the bittersweet, milky fluid squirt down his throat. Greedily he sucked at it until his stomach was filled and the hunger was gone. He stood up and breathed deeply. Over the past few minutes the teat, the flesh that surrounded it and even the walls and ceiling around him had taken on a deep, rosy glow. The whole house seemed to radiate a kind of contentment. He realised that in some way he had just reached a turning point. It had been an act of sharing. He had given himself completely, in a way he never had even with Jenny. He turned and looked behind him.

"He took the knife he had used back through to the kitchen it had been taken from and methodically began to clean it with the compulsive, jerky movements of a Lady MacBeth, ruthlessly scrubbing at the stainless steel long after the last trace of blood had gone."

The rosy glow seemed to percolate through him, making his nerve-ends tingle, spreading through his arms and legs. The glow spread out from him and the kitchen and along the corridor towards what had once been the living-room. The walls were sticky, wet. Deep love welled up in him, bringing sudden tears to his eyes. The glow seemed greatest beyond what had once been the living-room door. He moved towards it and stepped across the threshold. The floor was uneven. In the dim light he could see the furniture was gone. The floor dipped towards the far corner; a deep thrumming filled his mind, his body. He felt like he was going home. The walls around him seemed to lurch, to contract slightly. There was a wet sucking sound and he turned; the door was beginning to contract, to grow smaller. All the loneliness he had ever felt fled from him. He stepped towards the far corner of the living-room and away from the light. Coming home.

Mother.

Love.

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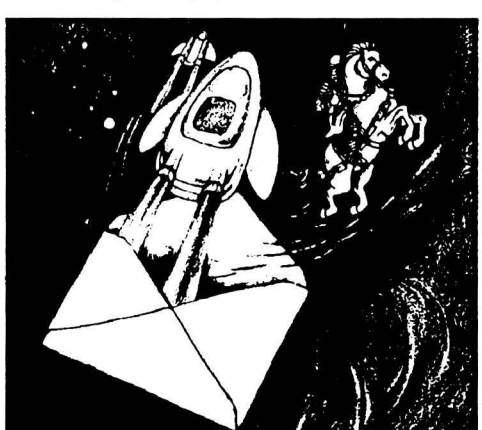

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ACCESS AND BARCLAYCARD ACCEPTED

Whoever first pointed out that you could choose your friends but not your family must have read Keith Brooke's chilling tale.

CAROLINE

I spotted Caroline standing at the Farmer's Arms bus stop and her eyes drilled right through my own, penetrating me, chilling my heart. I felt a twitch in my chest, a quiver that ran down my arm like a troupe of tiny animals. Muscles stretched and compressed — biceps extending, triceps contracting — and I felt my arm straightening, my grip tightening on the steering wheel, pulling it down, *down* . . .

The doctor told me I was a very lucky man. The crash could have killed me; as it was, they took thirty minutes to cut me free and I had only suffered whiplash and a few small bruises.

"I felt my arm pulling down," I told the houseman in Casualty, "and there was nothing I could do. It was like something had taken over control." I remember the tree rushing towards me. A magnificent, wide-boled oak, rusty barbed wire buried in its bark, one stark limb deadened by lightening several years before. The trunk was dark, so dark, and then there was a loud *whumpf* and the darkness of the tree spread through my mind, black figures reaching into my body, caressing me, smoothing the shock to my system and . . .

. . . and then pulling back the veil, clearing my mind, and there were people over me, cold stony ground pushing into my back and my skull. Caroline's was one of the faces and she held my hand as I was lifted into the ambulance.

"It was the shock of seeing your sister when you weren't expecting her," said a hospital porter in whom I had confided my tale. "'S only natural. Only next time you're taken by surprise — " he prodded my bruised arm and grinned " — make sure you're not driving!"

Caroline cared for me while my neck gradually unfroze (it still clicks painfully every so often, even now). We still shared Harry's — my father's — house, even though he'd been gone near to six months and the property is in my own name, now.

Years back, on my twenty-first birthday, the old chap had taken me aside. "You're a grown man," he had told me. "We're equals now: call me Harry. I'd be proud." Caroline had been hovering, as she so often does; on hearing his words she had turned and left with a loud *Harrumph!* She's always been the jealous sort, not content with how life has treated her; she couldn't accept that special bond between a man and his son, she saw it as something that should have been hers, too.

Caroline was a broken women when Mum died, so many years ago — that was a relationship I would never have encroached upon; the two of them together were stronger than any army. Shortly after Mum's funeral Caroline had found Tony to cry on and they were wed within four months of meeting. She was a broken woman again, twelve years later, when the only product of their precarious marriage died of meningitis. Robert was a cute kid, so unlike his parents. I cried at his funeral, as I cried at Harry's.

"She was a broken woman again, twelve years later, when the only product of their precarious marriage died of meningitis. Robert was a cute kid, so unlike his parents. I cried at his funeral, as I cried at Harry's."

As had always been clear would happen, Caroline's marriage ended. She lived in a spinster flat for a time, visiting my own flat and always making comparisons (my heating was less stuffy; my carpets a nicer shade; my furniture so much *better*; my rent was higher, too, but that would only have made her think of my better income — I could never win). Then Harry's cancer had been diagnosed, too late for any hope of treatment, and Caroline had moved in with him, to ease his way out of this life, as she had put it. The first time I visited them both I noticed with amusement that she had moved into my old room, was sleeping in my old bed, under my old quilt.

As his condition deteriorated, Harry took to asking for me, repeatedly. The doctor told me; Caroline would never have said, it would have twisted her jealous heart to admit that she was insufficient for her father's demands. I moved back in and slept in the guest room rather than give my sister any sense of victory by moving into the boxroom that had once been hers.

The months haven't faded the memory of Harry's death for me, his small grey hands enclosed in mine. Caroline has forgotten the man he was; all she can remember

is her own jealousy. As he died, she had walked from the room. He hadn't wanted to hold his daughter's hand, only mine.

I was in the Regency Arcade when the next attack occurred. Over the weeks since the crash I had suffered countless nervous tics and painful spasms of muscles throughout my body. My hands shook sometimes so that I could not even hold my morning cup of tea. And all the time Caroline watched, aloof but also the something in her eyes that was always beyond my ken.

We were walking, upstairs in the Arcade. "I'm going to watch the clock," said Caroline, and she strode off, leaving me alone before the window of a shop called One Village. The Arcade's clock is a Kit Williams; coloured balls pass magically through its mechanism of wheels and channels and it supports a white wooden bird and a snake that hangs threateningly over mice that appear in holes in the clock's side; hanging underneath is a fish that blows detergent bubbles on the hour.

I studied the weave of some sort of ethnic rug and bit into the nectarine that I had bought earlier. Juice ran down my chin and a soft, almost non-existent furriness filled my mouth. The taste was peculiar. Rank, pungent, an almost exotic spiciness, in fitting with the rug I had been studying. I looked at the fruit and gagged. Its interior was a dark bluish grey, paling and merging with the flesh's peachy tones just below the skin. It was rotten, foul, probably poisonous. I dropped it in a bin and continued to cough and splutter, mopping at the rancid juices on my chin with my handkerchief, even rubbing at my tongue in an effort to rid my mouth of the taste of decay.

"The taste was peculiar. Rank, pungent, an almost exotic spiciness, in fitting with the rug I had been studying. I looked at the fruit and gagged. Its interior was a dark bluish grey, paling and merging with the flesh's peachy tones just below the skin. It was rotten, foul, probably poisonous."

The distraction had caused me to drop my mental guard and I felt another spasm seize my body, so much stronger than the earlier ones. My entire right side went stiff and I fell and somehow I was at the top of the escalator and still falling, tumbling, my legs out-stretched. It's a terrible feeling when your muscles are not your own, the food you have eaten is fuelling them yet the messages from your brain are blocked and something else, some corrupting entity, is guiding them, telling them to lock, to stiffen, and there's nothing you can do to stop yourself from falling.

As I fell — my limbs thrashing painfully against the safety walls of the moving staircase, the sharp edges of the steps biting remorselessly into my body — I was struck by what was happening. I opened my eyes and the arched glass-and-metal-strut ceiling of the Arcade hung high above; faces looked down at me, once again, as I lay supine on the floor. Something was invading my body, eating me apart from within, rotting me from the core like the nectarine I had gagged on only minutes before. I had a vision of someone peeling back the skin from my face and seeing cold, white bones coated in an obscene blue-grey fungus, blood vessels pulsing darkly through a coating of slime, pus flowing down the channels of my nostrils. I felt those warm, fuzzy tendrils of darkness seeking a grip on my mind and fought them off. The thought of losing consciousness, relaxing my grip for even a moment . . . it scared me, I had to *fight*.

The doctor who examined me in Casualty gave me a clean bill of health. I told him about my uncontrollable muscular spasms and he looked thoughtful and then said I should visit my GP and describe my symptoms. They clearly had no time for me at the hospital. I spent a restless night in the guest room of my dead father's house. I was being eaten from within yet I was too scared to tell anyone. Caroline stayed up late, voices from night-time TV breaking through my door and battering at my head, teasing me, threatening me, *laughing* at me. Yet when the sounds had gone and my sister was quiet in her room — *my* old room — I felt so much more at risk. Lying on a mattress with only bedclothes to shield you from the cruel night, you can feel so vulnerable, so open to attack (even though my own attacks were from within).

"I had a vision of someone peeling back the skin from my face and seeing cold, white bones coated in an obscene blue-grey fungus, blood vessels pulsing darkly through a coating of slime, pus flowing down the channels of my nostrils."

I went to morning surgery and demanded to see my GP. "I can make you an appointment for tomorrow," the receptionist tried, but eventually I convinced her to fit me in.

Doctor Whitlow was talking into his telephone when he waved me absently into the room. He was short with me, abrupt, and I gave him a brief rundown of my symptoms: the trembling (my hand was steady as the building when I held it out for him), the spasms, the loss of control. He nodded, agreed with me, made me remove my shirt so he could prod at me and check my sensitivity to his touch.

"How do you *feel* about this loss of control?"

His question confounded me and I started to tell him and then I cursed myself and tried to stop, knowing always that I could not. I told him that it felt as if somebody else — some*thing* else — was seizing control of my muscles; I told him that I had not fallen down the escalator, I had been pushed. from *within*. I told him about the rotten fruit, how it had made me think of the dark, evil cancers that had eaten Harry from the inside, consuming his soul last of all. I cried again, over my father's death. It still hurt, so much.

Doctor Whitlow looked at his watch and then scribbled on a prescription pad. "I'm giving you some Librium," he said, "and also referring you to a neurologist at the Gen-

"In the woods, today, I fell and saved myself by grabbing Caroline's arm. Our eyes met, as they had so long ago when my car left the road and that mighty oak had tried to break my body."

eral — they'll contact you. Your symptoms could have a number of causes and they'll all be checked. My own opinion is that you're suffering from nervous exhaustion — your notes indicate that this may be true — you could view it as a delayed reaction to your father passing away.

"Go back to your sister," he concluded, "and ensure that she looks after you. You'll probably be fine in a few weeks." He ushered me to the door, even as I was fastening the buttons on my shirt.

Caroline was there in the waiting room and it was as if she knew all that had been said. She took my arm and led me to the bus and I told her the doctor had recommended rest, time to recover. She nodded, looking away, not really listening to me. I felt my arm tighten up, the muscles compressing, but it was only Caroline's grip on my arm, tightening as our bus came into view.

I haven't taken any of Doctor Whitlow's Librium. I haven't even collected the prescription; I stood outside Boots and then walked away, remembering the last time, the time Whitlow had seen referred to in my notes. I still remembered the shivering, the pain, the *craving* from when I was coming off the tranquillisers I had been given after I had parted from Dominique.

I have never married, although Dom took me close. It had just been a one night stand to begin with, then a casual fling, then an enjoyable affair. Then I put a ring on her finger and named a date and everything changed. She became overpowering, manipulative; gradually she edged her way into every aspect of my life, managing my bank account and my wardrobe, arranging my social life and even driving me to work so that she knew when I started and when I finished. She was squeezing me out of my own life, making it her own. I left her, despite her pleas and her commands, despite the terrible tearing feeling in my own heavy chest. The tranquillisers held me together, allowed my body and my soul to reunite, to some extent. But separating myself from those little blue tablets was almost as bad as parting from Dominique. I was physically in love with those pills. So I didn't pick up my Librium; I let Caroline nurse me instead, in her own inimical way.

Caroline takes me for walks. My problem is tension, my problem manifests itself through my muscles, therefore exercise will work those muscles, loosen that tension. Caroline's reasoning, not my own. But my symptoms have persisted despite my sister's care. My arms might tremble, my face might be twisted by a morse code of nervous tics and occasionally, too, an entire block of muscles might spasm and I will lose control and stumble or fall.

In the woods, today, I fell and saved myself by grabbing Caroline's arm. Our eyes met, as they had so long ago when my car left the road and that mighty oak had tried to break my body.

It was then that comprehension finally rose in my mind. I *knew* I felt her mind lock onto my own and I realised that always she has wanted more of what is mine than I could ever relinquish. The thing, the evil spirit that has been entering my body, using me, trying to learn how to control me . . . always, it was *Caroline*. She wants to have my body, just as she has always wanted what is mine. Her eyes left mine and she knew I had realised. all those years ago when she would walk into my room as I stood naked before the mirror . . . now I see it all differently. I feel dirty, violated, *penetrated* by my own sister. I want to vomit at thoughts of the perverted desires my sister has harboured but I cannot. The muscles in my throat, they're tight, stiff. My neck clicks painfully as the muscles tighten still further in a spasm that threatens to strangle me. Caroline steps towards me as I fell to the ground, clutching my own throat. "Leonard", she says, "What's wrong? Tell me what's wrong!" Even now she is devious. I lie on the ground and let her dark tendrils wrap themselves around my mind. Finally I am possessed.

"My grip tightens as the log hits my sister in the face. I raise it and hit her again and again, until I can see the flesh hanging in grey, rancid strands from the pure white of her cheek-bones. I'm beginning to feel better already."

The darkness lifts almost instantly and I can hear a rhythmic pounding, a crashing that shakes the ground.

On my knees, my vision is blurred but still I can see Caroline running away from me. I rise to my feet and run after her and darkness still fogs my mind, pulsing with the beat of my heavy, heavy footsteps.

She hears me and stops. She turns and sees me, smiles hysterically, opens her arms to me, those sisterly, incestuous arms.

I can feel it happening again. The muscles in my shoulder tighten as they did in the car, my deltoids, my triceps, my pectorals, all tightening, pulling my arm, straightening it. Pulling so hard, so fast.

Only, this time, there is nothing involuntary about my muscular spasm. There is consciousness behind my arm as it falls in a long, fast sweep, just as there is consciousness behind my tight grip on the log that nestles so comfortably in my hand. My grip tightens as the log hits my sister in the face. I raise it and hit her again and again, until I can see the flesh hanging in grey, rancid strands from the pure white of her cheek-bones. I'm beginning to feel better already.

BEAUTIFU

No matter how in control of your life you believe yourself to be, it can constantly take you by surprise. And, ironically, often by your own rules. Confused? Let Jack Wainer show you how.

You do realise," I said, "that if you become a Beautiful Loser, you will have no sex outside the group. As far as the rest of the school is concerned, you'll be a celibate." "A nun," said Judas. The girl nodded to show she understood. "However," I continued, "within the group, anything goes."

The girl smiled but didn't reply.

She had a lot of style, as you'd expect from anyone with the audacity to ask to join the Beautiful Losers. We very occasionally invited someone to join, but people didn't apply as if we were the Young Conservatives or Greenpeace.

She'd dressed well. Everything she wore was black except for a red scarf. The black shirt and jeans emphasised how small and skinny she was.

"There'll be a task to prove your commitment," said Skunk. "You know a challenge, like."

"That'll be set by the group," added Joan of Arc. "You'll have no say in it."

"That's so," I explained. "It will probably be away from your own particular talent."

I knew the girl was a Mathematical phenomenon. She'd taken her A levels in Pure and Applied Maths at 14, and gained two A grades.

In that, she was definitely qualified to join the Beautiful Losers. Our name was deliberately ironic; every member had an outstanding talent in some field. Prince John's graffiti, B.J.'s computer hacking, Joan of Arc's music, Skunk's fluency in seven languages.

"Yes', it'll be well away from Maths," said Joan of Arc.

This was a bit unfair, really. At first, our initiation challenges *had* been matched to our particular talents.

Prince John's mural on the Cathedral wall had taken him the whole of a Saturday night. It had been quite appropriate really, being his version of the Last Supper. The fact that the 13 were eating each other rather than bread and wine had shocked the Sunday worshippers somewhat and had our bigoted old Bishop shrieking of blasphemy. The press had enjoyed it though, rushing photographers over before our respectable religious philistines could obliterate it.

"If you decide to take up the problem we set you and you do become a Beautiful Loser," I said, "you'll need a new name. To be used within the group."

"That's a bit premature . . . . ," began Joan of Arc, but I ignored her.

"I am Vincent. And that is Joan of Arc. Over here is Princess Fellatio, B.J. for short."

B.J. pretended to look offended, then he grinned. His freckles and wild ginger hair made him look an errant choirboy.

"This is Prince John," I went on, "and these three are Grainne, Judas and Skunk."

The girl smiled. Most of the group smiled back, though Joan of Arc looked out of the window and Grainne looked impassive. Grainne never smiled.

"Have you any idea what you'd like us to call you?" I asked. "What about Lilith" She was Adam's first wife, prior to Eve. She refused to consider herself his inferior, and was expelled. The first feminist, really."

"No, not Lilith," the girl replied. "When I complete my task, I'd like to be known as Rimbaud."

"Rambo?" echoed B.J. "Bloody Rambo?"

I made eye-contact with the girl and sighed sympathetically.

"R-I-M-B-A-U-D," she spelled out. "Like the French poet."

"One of the Decadents," I said. "A genuine decadent. Not a wimpish imitation of one. You're pathetic, B.J."

B.J. waved an apology and Grainne spoke.

"I think," she said quietly, "that little Rimbaud here is going to have to kill someone."

UL LOSERS

There was a five second silence. Grainne's contributions were infrequent, but always listened to.

"Well, maybe," I said. "But it's raising the stakes a little."

"No, it's not," said Joan of Arc. "Skunk killed three on his challenge."

Skunk interrupted.

"I caused three deaths, yes. But that's not quite the same as sending her out to kill someone."

Skunk had caused a power-cut that had blacked out half the country. Although the hospital emergency generator had cut in pretty quickly, an old woman had died on the operating table. A young couple had been killed in a wrecked car on a level crossing. Skunk had claimed all three, at the time.

"Let her kill her sister," said Prince John excitedly. "Or her mother."

"We could get her to kill the Tadpole," said Skunk.

The Tadpole was a teacher who'd made the mistake of trying to impose normal school rules on the Beautiful Losers. Skunk had never forgiven him.

"I do hear," said Joan of Arc, "that little Rimbaud here once had the hots for the Maths teacher. Perhaps we should tell her to dispatch him."

"Look," said B.J. "Are we sure that a murder is a suitable task for her initiation?"

"We didn't invite her to join," said Joan of Arc. "She came to us. That should raise the entry fee."

"That's quite right," said young Rimbaud.

Everyone turned and stared.

"I accept the challenge," she said. "It's fair enough."

I was impressed.

"Well done," I said.

"Who's the victim?" Judas asked.

"Leave it to the girl," Grainne said. "Be less predictable, that way."

"So be it," I said. "Rimbaud, your initiation task to become a Beautiful Loser is to kill. Teacher, child, mother, sister; we don't mind. Make it within . . . let's say a month. If you can make it look an accident, there'll be less hassle. But it's up to you."

"No problem," said Rimbaud "I'll be a full member within a week."

She got up and strolled from the room.

"Arrogant little bitch," said Joan of Arc.

"Cool, though," said B.J.

Judas and Skunk left to go to a Literature tutorial. Joan of Arc took out her flute and played a piece so pure and etherial that it broke your heart to listen. Prince John sketched a picture of a naked girl nailed to a cross, as he listened.

Over the next few days, I found myself speculating how Rimbaud would accomplish her task. Would she select her target, then wait for an opportunity to arise? Rely on Fate to provide a chance for her to act? That would be a sensible way to do it, but very time-consuming. We had given her a month, but she'd insisted she needed less than a week, deliberately cutting down her options. Foolish, that boast. She was no doubt regretting her bravado already.

She could decide to take out a complete stranger. That would be the safest option, much easier to avoid any suspicion. Push someone under a train or off a high bridge without even knowing his name. Not too difficult at all.

But from what I'd seen of Rimbaud, I doubted she'd take the easy option.

No, she'd choose a target, then plan her action. Prince John had suggested her sister. I'd seen the girl around school, a dumpy twelve year old with glasses. Nothing special. She looked of average intelligence, non descript looks, boring personality. She'd make a fair victim; no-one would miss a forgettable like her.

"Prince John's mural on the Cathedral wall had taken him the whole of a Saturday night. It had been quite appropriate really, being his version of the Last Supper. The fact that the 13 were eating each other rather than bread and wine had shocked the Sunday worshippers somewhat and had our bigoted old Bishop shrieking of blasphemy."

On the Tuesday afternoon, I actually thought she'd done it when Skunk came into the VI form common room.

"Have you heard?" he said. "About the accident? Some kid's swallowed something in the science lab. Just seen the ambulance."

"Rimbaud's sister?" I asked.

"No," said Skunk. "A boy in the first year. Showing off to his friends."

I began to wonder whether Rimbaud would tackle a teacher. I knew she wouldn't take out her Maths teacher, as Joan of Arc had suggested, even if she had outgrown her crush on him. The Tadpole had been a good idea though. We'd all have been happy if she'd remove that vindictive little turd.

Young, keen and full of herself, the Tadpole had not picked up the unspoken staff-room consensus that the Beautiful Losers were off-limits as far as school discipline was concerned. He'd tried to report Skunk for a minor misdemeanor involving a drinking session in the lunch hour. Skunk had been outraged. We'd had to arrange for a couple of senior staff to really lean on the Tadpole before he'd drop it. Even then it was obvious he still bore a grudge.

Yes, if Rimbaud has decided to rid the world of that particular specimen, we'd have nominated her for the Nobel Prize for service to humanity.

But she didn't. There was just one happy moment when the Head announced in Assembly that a member of staff had been fatally injured in a road traffic accident. Out hopes rose, but were dashed when we glanced round and saw the Tadpole was alive and present.

On Friday, B.J., Prince John and I had the common room to ourselves, when Judas came in and startled us with an announcement.

"I reckon," he said, "that Rimbaud is going to take one of us."

We stared. It was a possibility we hadn't really considered, but the more we thought about it . . .

"It's a thought." I said.

"She's got the nerve," said B.J. "And we did tell her that all activity was to be kept within the group."

"That was sexual activity," said Prince John, "but you could be right."

"If so," I mused, "then our beloved St Joan has got to be a strong contender. She came on pretty strong when Rimbaud was here. Really anti she was, I remember."

"Do you think we should mention it to her?" asked B.J.

"Who, Joan of Arc?" said Prince John. She's well able to take care of herself. Besides, she wouldn't thank you if you warned her."

"She'd be offended you even though it necessary," said Judas. "And she's not a girl to offend, is she?"

We agreed; and B.J., Judas and Prince John went off to get a coffee. I wondered whether Prince John remembered that it was he who'd suggested to Rimbaud that she should kill her sister or mother.

Grainne came in, and sat down. I began tentatively to broach the possibility we'd been discussing.

"Grainne, have you thought that young Rimbaud might choose one of the Beautiful Losers? As her victim, I mean."

"That's her most likely option," said Grainne. "Has been from the beginning."

That was Grainne: quiet, brooding, and full of the most intuitive insights. While the rest of us had floundered around speculating and guessing, she'd known that Rimbaud would choose one of us to kill. Had known from the beginning. Perhaps had even known from the moment when she'd suggested leaving the choice of victim open.

"'I think,' she said quietly, 'that little Rimbaud here is going to have to kill someone.' There was a five second silence. Grainne's contributions were infrequent, but always listened to."

She was right too. It was Sunday afternoon, six days after we'd set the task, that I got the phone call. It was Prince John.

"She's done it," he said excitedly. "School gym. Come now."

It wasn't difficult to get into school out of hours, using the skylight with the permanently broken catch. We'd used it many times when we needed a venue for a group orgy or a rendez-vous for a passionate coupling.

As I crossed the flat roof, I caught up with Judas who was just lifting the skylight. We dropped down into the common room and made our way to the gym. Everyone was there. Rimbaud was sitting up at the top of the wall-bars. Down below stood Grainne and Prince John, Skunk and Joan of Arc. Lying on a crash-mat and wearing only a shirt was B.J., his cherubic face marred by his protruding tongue and a tight wire noose embedded into his chubby neck.

I looked up at Rimbaud.

"You did it then," I said.

She waved one hand, then blew a kiss.

Joan of Arc spoke for her.

"Of course she did it. I watched the whole thing."

We all turned and stared.

"How come?" Skunk asked.

Rimbaud hung from the top bar by her hands.

"I thought a witness would make it more official," she said.

"I watched from over there," said Joan of Arc. "In the equipment store. It was absolutely brilliant."

Rimbaud flicked out from the wall-bars and landed daintily on her feet.

"It was nothing," she said modestly.

"Oh no?" said Joan of Arc. "you should have seen his expression change when she stopped stroking him and crushed his noisettes with both hands. He was still clutching himself when she whipped behind him with the wire. Like a ballet dancer, she was. You should have seen his erection flop. Oh Jesus."

She looked at Grainne who was down on the crash-mat, peering into the dead eyes of the former Beautiful Loser.

"Anyone there?" she asked.

Grainne shook her head, and closed B.J.'s eyes.

"Well, I guess she's in," I said.

"There's no doubt of it," said Joan of Arc, taking Rimbaud's left hand and kissing it.

"No doubt at all," echoed Prince John, kissing her right hand. "Welcome to the Beautiful Losers."

"One in, one out" said Skunk philosophically. "But who's going to hack into the school computer and raise my Maths grade now?"

"More to the point," I said, "what do we do with this?"

Everyone looked at the corpse.

"String it up to the high beam," suggested Prince John. "Make it look like suicide."

"I guess so," I said. "Dress him someone. Judas, find the big stepladder."

Grainne and Skunk pulled on B.J.'s underpants and jeans, and zipped him up. We lowered the beam, and knotted the end of the wire round it. It took four of us to haul the beam back up with the body swinging below it.

We stood in silence and stared at the swaying figure above us.

"Best leave the steps lying on the floor," I said, "as if he'd kicked them over."

"What about a suicide note?" asked Skunk. "How we gonna do that?"

"It's here," said Rimbaud calmly. "Ran it off on B.J.'s printer on Thursday."

She produced a letter from her pocket. Grainne took it and read it.

"Had an identity crisis," she said impassively. "Worried about his sexual orientation."

I but my lip to prevent myself saying that B.J. was the least worried person in the world about his sexual orientation. Any of them.

I caught Grainne's eye, and for a split second thought I glimpsed a tear. But I knew for sure that I must be drastically wrong.

"Leave the note on the floor," she growled, "and let's get out of this place."

Fifty minutes later we were drinking wine in Prince John's room, either celebrating or holding a wake. I'm not sure which.

"One thing's for sure," said Skunk cheerfully. "Rimbaud certainly fulfilled what we asked. That has to be the worst initiation task so far."

"You don't think seducing that fat caretaker was easy, do you?" said Judas plaintively. "He was gross."

Everyone laughed except Grainne.

She looked at Rimbaud steadily, and the room suddenly went quiet.

"Tell me," she said, "why B.J.?"

Rimbaud stared back with a smile.

"The boy was a fool," she said. "Surely anyone who didn't know the difference between the poet Rimbaud and Sylvester Stallone didn't deserve to be a Beautiful Loser. We're the elite. We don't need peasants."

Skunk and Judas shrugged and poured more wine into their glasses.

Joan of Arc and Prince John put their arms round Rimbaud, pulled her to the floor and began to make love to her.

I raised my glass to the unsmiling Grainne.

"Absent friends," I said.

"Everyone was there. Rimbaud was sitting up at the top of the wall-bars. Down below stood Grainne and Prince John, Skunk and Joan of Arc. Lying on a crash-mat and wearing only a shirt was B.J., his cherubic face marred by his protruding tongue and a tight wire noose embedded into his chubby neck."

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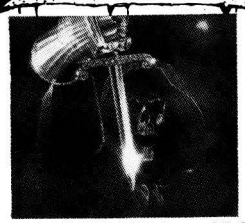

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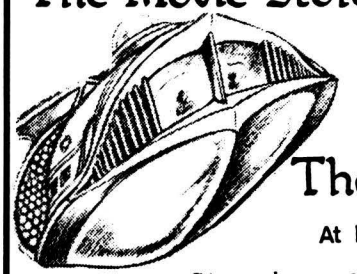

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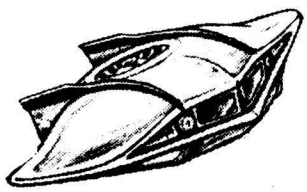

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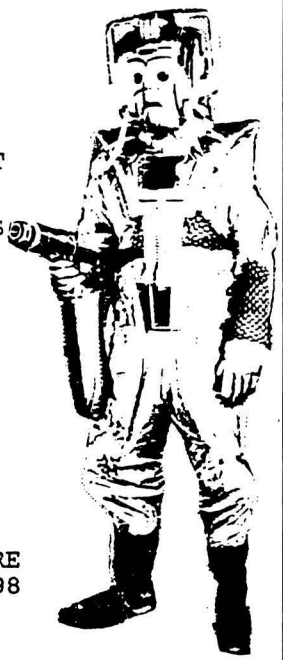

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LAST WRITES

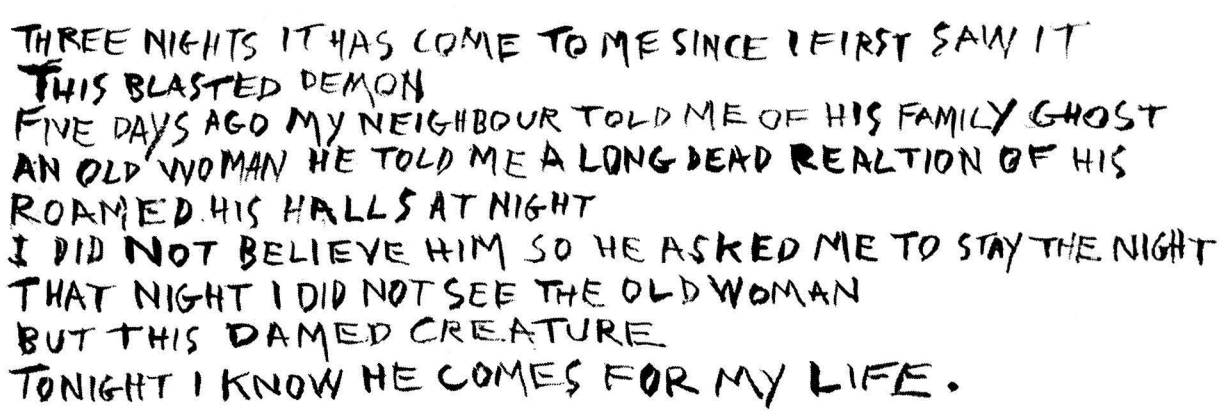
In our December issue, we celebrated the publication of Simon Marsden's stunning and thought-provoking collection of photographs, PHANTOMS OF THE ISLES, with a competition to win copies of the book. The challenge? Give us your vision of a ghost.

To say we've been overwhelmed with the response would be an understatement. In fact, we're tempted to extend the qualifying date because of the range and quality of your submissions. Meanwhile, to give you a flavour of the entries, we present a sample couple of visions. Darron Walton from Camberley apologises for the brevity of his poem and thanks us for listening; in return, we remind him that size isn't everything and thank him for talking to us.

Meanwhile, Dessie Mulcahy from County Tipperary presents evidence of a double threat — artist and poet. His vision of a demon reveals the most astounding fact about your submissions — the stunning commitment you demonstrate to real, personal horror. That's great: it suggests you've understood what we're trying to do here with the magazine. Meanwhile, thanks to our two competitors — we need more readers like this.

REMEMBRANCE

by Darron Walton
A whispered word
A gentle brush
Against my cheek
For an instant, she LIVES AGAIN!
And then
Is gone
Forever.


THREE NIGHTS IT HAS COME TO ME SINCE I FIRST SAW IT
THIS BLASTED DEMON
FIVE DAYS AGO MY NEIGHBOUR TOLD ME OF HIS FAMILY GHOST
AN OLD WOMAN HE TOLD ME A LONG DEAD REALTION OF HIS
ROAMED HIS HALLS AT NIGHT
I DID NOT BELIEVE HIM SO HE ASKED ME TO STAY THE NIGHT
THAT NIGHT I DID NOT SEE THE OLD WOMAN
BUT THIS DAMED CREATURE
TONIGHT I KNOW HE COMES FOR MY LIFE.

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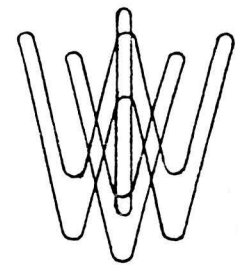

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